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CAMP CASTAWAY

BY

CHARLES CLARK MUNN

AUTHOR OF "UNCLE TERRY," "ROCKHAVEN,"
"THE GIRL FROM TIM'S PLACE," ETC.

ILLUSTRATED BY
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TO MY YOUNG FRIENDS

Once upon a time I was a boy and like most boys I built wildwood air castles, chief of which was a log cabin beside a sequestered lake where fish and game were plenty. Here in that idyllic home I planned to abide when manhood was reached and live the true life of a noble redman with birch canoe, my rod and gun, and a few kindred mates for companions. And the trout we caught, the game we killed and fur animals we trapped in this sportsman's Elysium, were beyond even dreams.

Since then I have journeyed by canoe many times through a vast, primal wilderness and have camped and lived for months in a bark or log cabin beside many a sequestered lake where man came not but only the Eternal Presence was in hiding. Where deer strolled unafraid along rippled shores and trout leaped out to greet the morning sun. And so charming were those romantic days; so restful and soul inspiring that wildwood life with all its craft, and so many times have I lived those quiet perfect days over amid the strife of life, that I wish all my friends to now join me in this book.

CHARLES CLARK MUNN.

"Then, with teeth shut hard, Old Renus . . . grasped that frail cedar stem'"

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CAMP CASTAWAY

CHAPTER I

FOR most of that bright September day Orlo and his two cronies, Jim and Levi, had seen and thought only of a captive balloon they found to be one of the attractions of the Goshen County cattle show. They spied it upon their arrival, just rising aloft from a roped-in enclosure at the far end of the grounds and being the first one they had ever seen, rushed pell-mell to that corner to stand agape and watch the big yellow bag with four people in its wicker basket, rise slowly upward.

"Gee whiz, but that must be great!" exclaimed Orlo.

"Must be up higher'n Pilot Knob now," Jim added.

"'Course 'tis," sneered Levi, prone to sarcasm. "Pilot Knob ain't a primin' to that! It's up most a mile already!"

Then all three watched in breathless suspense that now barrel-sized balloon swaying at the end

of its tethering rope. Soon the clank of a windlass turned by two men beside the enclosure was heard and three pairs of eager eyes followed that captive air craft back to earth again. Two couples among the score in waiting, next paid their fifty cents each and climbed down into the basket from a little platform. Then with shouts of delight and waving of handkerchiefs up they went, watched enviously by the boys this time. And their exclamations of "Wonderful! Sublime!" and the like on returning, only made the three glum watchers the more disconsolate.

"It's awful to be poor," asserted Orlo lugubriously after two more ascensions had been made, for the fact was his pocket money amounted to just fifty-seven cents, and the midday treat, a steaming oyster stew, long anticipated, would cost a quarter.

"Let's go see something else," advised Jim, who had a vein of philosophy. "I hain't but forty-two cents 'n' it's no use longin' to go up in that balloon."

They left that alluring corner with gloomy faces.

But the fair attractions they had looked forward to for so many weeks now appeared to have vanished. The row of tents containing the living skeleton, the bearded lady and kindred curiosities,

held no charm for them. The long building where huge pumpkins and prize vegetables were on show were not even peeped into. They were quite used to such things. Even monster pigs and fat oxen were equally lacking in interest. Only that beautiful and alluring balloon which kept going up and coming down with persistent and most vexatious regularity, held them spellbound.

When noon came, the oyster stew and a bag of ginger cookies were invested in, together with a big orange; and still later, when the grandstand began to fill, the boys lined up alongside the trotting track to watch the racing. But even this seemed tame.

For a half-hour more they watched the scoring and races, but so far away from the finish line they could not tell which horse won, in fact, they did not care much. Turning away they noticed that their beautiful balloon was not rising now and there was no crowd about it. Clearly this must be looked into, and with that, a faint hope came that its manager might be persuaded to take them up a little way for what was left of their combined pocket money, about thirty cents. As they pushed their way out of the crowd alongside the track, who should they meet but Old Renus!

Now this nondescript old trapper and hunter,

who lived a hermit's life in one room of a long disused house, a half mile from their homes, had for six years been their mentor and hero, and his way of existence, an ideal one, they some day meant to follow. He had been their tutor in all wood lore, in catching fish, in snaring and trapping all game and fur-bearing animals. They had enjoyed many a charming autumn evening in front of his open fire, listening to wildwood tales, while eating the nuts and apples he provided. So as the years went on this fine old woodsman had become far dearer than all their other friends.

"Wal, boys," he said, now smiling benignly down at them, "havin' a good time, be ye? Seen the snake charmer 'n' wild man o' Borneo, hev ye?"

"No, we haven't and don't much care to," grunted Orlo, who usually spoke for the other two. "But we wanted to go up in the balloon and can't. We haven't money enough."

"Wal, that's too bad," answered the old man sympathetically, "but I wouldn't let a thing like that spile the hull day, boys. Let's go take a look at the balloon 'n' see if it's safe to go up in. I kinder figgered it wan't." Then he led the way over to the roped enclosure.

Then the three glowing-faced boys felt like dancing for very joy, for it seemed as if their

splendid old hero might open his heart and pocket-book and pay for the treat they longed for.

The great silk bag was held to earth by a half-inch rope. He looked it over with critical eyes, felt of its light wicker basket with thick board bottom, stooped to examine how the rope was fastened to it, peeped at the windlass with its long cylinder about which the rope was wound. Then he accosted the man in charge.

"How's the rope fastened at the bottom end, Mister?" he asked cautiously. "Any danger o' it's givin' away thar?"

"Not a particle," came the assuring answer. "We look out for that. We don't mean to lose our balloon. Take a trip up, sir, your boys will enjoy it immensely. As the crowds are at the races, you can stay up a little time extra." Thus satisfied and persuaded, Old Renus counted out two dollars in change, the wildly excited boys vaulted into the basket, their old hero followed, and soon the balloon shot upward.

Then what joy supreme came to those three lads! Never before had they seen or felt anything like it! Soon the crowd around the race track merged into a black rim and the speeding horses appeared like squirrels. The broad expanse of meadow, pasture and bits of forest lay below like a wondrous carpet crossed by faint

lines of roadway. Here and there a lake or pond glistened bright in the afternoon sun and so enraptured were those boys, they could scarcely speak or breathe, they could only stare down at the wondrous panorama.

Now Orlo could faintly discern the outlines of his own farm home—the house, a tiny white spot between two patches of green with a larger brown barn separated from it by what seemed like a long gray cord. Close by, a flashing triangle, he knew was the old mill pond, and winding away from that the white thread of Mizzy Brook. Just then, as the boys were deeply absorbed in this faint landscape, there came a sharp jolt to the basket and the balloon shot skyward! The very thing Old Renus feared, had happened!

The balloon, lightly loaded and rising rapidly, had broken its tethering rope away at the foot.

"My God! boys, we've gone loose sure's a gun!" Old Renus exclaimed in horrified tones. "'N' the Lord only knows what'll happen next!"

The three boys then dropped from almost breathless joy to abject fear; they cringed, too, at the horror of shooting up into space, and clung to Old Renus as if he could save them. They dared not even look over the basket rim now. They could only clasp his legs in shivering fear.

"No use in gettin' too skeered, boys," the old

man cautioned, recovering his own composure a little. "We may go up whar it's middlin' cold I callate, but we'll come down som'ers. The gas is sure to 'scape little at a time'n let us down, so cheer up! We're goin' to live to tell o' this yit."

"We got an anchor out too," he added a moment later, after peeping over the basket. "I kin see a bit o' wood danglin' at the end o' our rope." The boys, now squatted on the bottom of the basket and still clinging to his legs, took heart, but they dared not look over the side.

"We'er headin' north 'n' goin' like mad," Old Renus next announced, peeping over again. "I kin just make out the earth 'n' a shinin' spot which must be a lake."

A new sensation came now for the balloon entered a bank of fog and shut the sun and dark earth from view. It grew suddenly colder also. The boys shivered in their summer raiment as did Old Renus wearing only a coat over his gray shirt. By animal instinct, he crouched low himself and the boys clung close to one another. Then on and on they sped with that chill fog enveloping them for a half-hour.

"I'm most froze," whimpered Levi, the least courageous of the three, at this juncture.

"Whip your arms, boys, all on us," Old Renus

next advised. "We got to do it now to keep alive," and with that he began to swing his arms.

But it was a sad and sorry spectacle those four now made, facing out whipping their arms across their chests, the only way they could keep blood circulating. Their ears were stinging from the bitter cold. Their courage was nearly vanishing and with reason. Totally unused to such an experience, they did not dare to let the gas out of the balloon.

It was pitiful also to Old Renus to have those he loved watch his tense face so appealingly when the arm thrashing ceased a moment. A grim fear also came to him, that after sunset it was sure to grow much colder and he knew full well only the most violent exertion would keep them all from freezing in that bitterly cold air, made worse by the freezing fog. He blamed himself too for the scrape they were in. He was slowly losing hope for he was conscious that they were now miles up. The gasping for breath and the thumping of their hearts from the rarified air, told him that to go much higher meant sure death. But this he must not let them know.

One critical and tragic moment came soon, however, and with it a new, ghastly fear and drowsy feeling to old Renus. Once before in the far north when he had lost consciousness and sleep meant

death, he had been saved by a younger companion who beat and pounded him to waken life. But no strong friend was with him now. Only these boys, moaning and crying in an agony of fear! To live for them came next as an inspiration, and with it the faint hope he might fight off the deathly torpor until the balloon plunged down into warmer air again.

"Keep me awake, boys, for God's sake 'n' your own," he gasped faintly, now sinking down into the basket.

"Pound me hard, Orlo, 'n' don't let up. I'm gettin' sleepy 'n' it means—means death to me. I've got to save ye, boy, fer—fer your mother."

Orlo, though not at all understanding this last heart call, did so. With one arm around his old hero's neck he began beating and pounding his breast and slapping his face while Jim and Levi, equally scared, added their fists to the saving work.

"Keep it up, boys, don't stop. I'm awake yit," came pleadingly again from the freezing one. "Even hurt me if ye kin, boys, it'll save my life."

Beat and slap him they now did in anxious and deathly fear, for a long ten minutes. Then something else happened meaning life for all of them, for a down sweeping current of air drew them

earthward until the drowsy one felt the warming air and woke again.

"We're goin' down, boys," he whispered, rousing up, "'n' we're goin' to be saved. I kin tell it by the air." Soon also a cheering sight appeared below, as down through the enveloping bank of frozen fog they plunged, and that was the round, red sun, close to the horizon line, and far, far below, a broad, shining river!

"It's the St. Lawrence, boys, 'n' we're still goin' north," Old Renus shouted. "But we're nearin' the earth and it's growin' warmer every minute! Hooray! Hooray!"

And sure enough it was!

But night and darkness was upon them, yet hope grew brighter with the warming air. It did not take much to cheer those boys after what they had passed through, and so quick an uplift came at what they saw in the face of Old Renus, that tears of thankfulness welled out of their eyes.

"We're goin' to be saved ain't we Uncle Renus?" Orlo next whispered.

"Sure we are, Orlo, sure's a gun," came the confident answer. "We're lowerin' fast, now. Fust we know we'll be caught by some tree 'n' next to Mother Earth once more. 'N' then it's hooray for us!"

But the earth was no longer visible. Only the

stars above, and they were still speeding onward. Though chilled, they no longer needed the arm whipping, but clinging close together like a human ball, they kept warm.

Now, to cheer them, Old Renus began telling stories. And wonderful ones they were too. Of streams he had found in a far-off wilderness so full of trout they would snap at a bare hook. Of lakes no human being had visited where deer were so tame they stood on sandy shores and watched him, quite unafraid. Of reed-filled lakes, where wild ducks were legion, and many more marvelous tales and wondrous finds that only an Old Renus could evolve, while on and on they sped.

Sometime midway of that strange, eerie, solemn, and silent night, with only the stars above visible, there came a yank at their wicker basket, another and still another; the basket canted slowly more and more, until peering down, Old Renus saw the gleam of a narrow, sandy lake shore, and just beyond, stars reflected from motionless water!

More wonderful also and from close at hand came the low musical tinkle of a brook.

CHAPTER II

THE advent of such a nondescript as Old Renus in Oakham became not only a nine days' wonder but an unsolved mystery. He appeared one May afternoon from no one knew where, garbed almost as a hobo, and carrying a pack and rifle; entering Phinney's general store and post-office, he bought a piece of bacon, a loaf of bread and other simple supplies, also a few ordinary cooking utensils and tin table ware, and then vanished, leaving Squire Phinney and two of the Old Guard, loafers on watch there, agape with astonishment.

"Wal, if that ain't an ornery, grumpy specimen o' humanity, I never seen one," the former ejaculated after watching Old Renus leave the main street and head for a wooded upland back of the village. "Couldn't git a word outer him nohow, 'cept 'I want so 'n' so 'n' how much is it.' I tried hard to start him talkin' too. Said ' be ye a trapper if I might ask,' as I was doin' up his things,

but all the answer I got war, 'tie 'em with a lettle heavier string, mister, if ye kin'.' He seemed to hev plenty o' money howsomever, fer he fished a roll o' bills out 'n' peeled a five off to pay with. 'Travelin' fur be ye,' I next asked, handin' him the change. 'Oh, jest a spell,' he sorter grinned back 'n' that's all I cud pump out."

"Must be a trapper then," Lem Bishop, one of the Old Guard returned, cutting off a fresh quid to calm his excitement. "But what's one o' them sort doin' here now? 'Taint trappin' season, sides thar ain't nothin' much to ketch 'round here 'cept a few musquash 'n' now 'n' then a mink up in Mizzy Swamp."

"Callate he's goin' to camp 'round here, do ye Squire?" the second Old Guard queried. "If so, I reckon we all best count up our chickens." And those comments were merely the first ripples of the wave of astonishment that swept over Oakham after the arrival of this queer, quaint, old fellow who came wearing patched raiment, and needing a hair-cut. He parried all questions as to his identity and plans except that his name was Irenus Thorp and, as he admitted, "A sorter no account, rollin' stone who jest happened to fetch up here 'n' meant no harm to nobody." It soon developed that he had found shelter in an abandoned house known as the old Crowell Place,

on a byroad a mile from the village, and beside a stream, and that he had at once sought its owner Jason Crowell, to pay the rent of twenty dollars pen annum. Furthermore, he had bought an ax, a saw, hammer and nails, and set about making a unique home by fitting one room with a bunk, table, benches, and window sashes in three windows that had been wide open for a generation. Meantime, and as more evidence of his domestic intentions, he cleared, spaded and planted the bush-choked garden, fencing it with an ample supply of weather-beaten boards taken from the old rookery, built a low porch over his door and a short piazza in front and patched the few holes in this "den" with shingles from the partly fallen roof. More amazing than all this, however, was the almost unbelievable fact that he had, two days after his arrival, deposited five hundred dollars in the village savings bank!

At first he was watched furtively by the Old Guard when he appeared at Phinney's store to buy various supplies, tools, etc., including a second-hand cook stove, a few white ware dishes, earthen crocks and the like; while Phinney, an amiable, if inquisitive Yankee tried his best to draw out this queer old fellow but failed lamentably. The village boys just now busy at planting were even more curious as to the plans and future

of Old Renus—as he soon came to be called—than their elders. Likewise more sympathetic, for, heralded as a probable trapper, his prospective mode of existence appealed to them at once. Planting, hoeing, turning "grin'stun'," and haying, interspersed with countless chores with an occasional afternoon's fishing—seemed a hard, prosy lot. While to live as Old Renus planned, would be ideal.

Jim and Levi Pratt and Orlo Upson—the only son of a widow—whose homes lay not far apart and about midway between the village and his old rookery, with half a dozen other boys, would meet after chores and scamper across lots to a hilltop above, to watch this tumble-down old house, formerly inhabited by bats. It had always seemed an uncanny spot to them, and its bare rafters kin to the ribs of a giant skeleton, while the two oval panes above its front door facing west, oft blinked at sunset like the eyes of a demon. How long the house had thus stood an uncanny ruin, the boys did not know. Long enough for its bared timbers to be bleached gray and its open windows to grin through the bushes.

But now a marvel was in process of development for them. A wonderful and woodwise old trapper and hunter had come to abide here. Probably he would follow his calling as soon as

his new home was made ready, and he might be willing to show them where better fishing could be found, or more glorious still, take them along on a coon hunt when autumn came. And so the possibilities of Old Renus multiplied in their minds as they watched him at a distance.

Among the Old Guard, and the score of farmers that made up the village proper, that bank account became a passport to confidence in his honesty at least, and by the time he had made his one room habitable, he threw off his trapper disguise, so to speak, by a visit to the village barber, and by donning a respectable, gray suit, and a decent hat bought at Phinney's store. But Old Renus did not abate his reticence one iota. He was civil and polite so far as any business exchange went, and would even comment on the weather or crop prospects when at the village store. But if questioned about his past, or of his future plans, he shut up like a clam. The riddle of his mysterious advent, therefore, remained unsolved.

During the first week—as the Old Guard found out, he had been working from daylight until dark upon his one room home, or in the garden, but the stream known as Mizzy Brook that wound its cascading way through the village was prolific of trout and it was thought, would surely tempt such

an old woodsman; in fact two of the Old Guard had made small bets with Phinney that when Sunday came he would be seen fishing on it.

But they lost, Old Renus thereby making a great advance toward the good will and respect of Oakham.

The acquaintance between Orlo, his two cronies and the old man, began unexpectedly and through Orlo alone. So far none of the boys had dared to accost this keen-eyed, bushy-browed, strong-faced old woodsman; they could only watch him furtively when the chance came in the village. He made no overtures to them beyond a kindly smile. But the third Saturday afternoon after his arrival, Orlo, then eight years old, obtaining his mother's permission, filled his spice box with good worms, and, alder pole in hand, ran a full mile to a branch of the Mizzy above the Crowell Place to begin a joyous four hours of prime sport. He met mishap however almost at the start, for, catching his hook on a high limb he climbed to free it; the limb broke, and Orlo landed upon the rocks below with a bruised knee and badly wrenched ankle, whereupon he proceeded to emit a few yells of trouble.

Just then Old Renus, who started fishing above came along fortunately, like a good Samaritan.

"Don't ye cry boy," he said soothingly, feeling

the injured leg. "Ye haint broke no bones 'n' I'll fix the pain in no time." This he did in his wise way by putting pads of moss on both knee and swollen ankle and bathing them in the almost ice cold water for a long half-hour; meantime telling Orlo how he had watched a mink from ambush just above, how that sly animal had slid into a deep pool to emerge with a quarter pound trout to feed its young, until Orlo forgot his pain, and was only thankful he had thus made the friend he wanted. Later, this rough but gentle nurse shouldered the boy and carried him to his own gate, and further to console him, gave him the string of trout he himself had caught. Then he departed hurriedly.

This seemed strange to Orlo, but he felt that this mishap had opened the way to a further acquaintance, and possibly to many chances for fishing and trapping later on. He wondered a little why Old Renus had given him the trout, and why his mother seemed more interested in what this old fellow had said to him than in the accident itself.

When Sunday evening came and chores done, Orlo, fortified by Jim and Levi, made haste to call upon this quaint woodsman and was astonished at finding how secure and comfortable a room he had fitted up in the old ruin. The floor,

once warped and rotten, had been laid anew with smooth planed boards, the walls ceiled up, a bright chintz curtain enclosed his bunk in one corner, a shiny oilcloth covered an oblong table, a cupboard closet held an array of tinware and dishes, his old stove near the fireplace glistened, a pair of iron fire-dogs with brass knobs held a load of white birchwood, snowy scrim curtains draped the windows, while two rustic chairs stood on the short porch. Most surprising of all, a glass vase of buttercups and daisies smiled on the table.

"Mighty glad to see ye boys, I am," Old Renus welcomed them cheerily, leading the way into this surprising "den" and watching them look around. "Fact is I never hed a home o' my own afore 'cept mebbe a log cabin or two in the woods. 'N' I didn't quite callate on this till I started in, only to fix up a shelter when it stormed 'n' to sleep in. But when I got the windows in they sorter seemed to call fer curtains 'n' the bunk kinder said it needed hidin' 'n' the new floor told me I must shine up the stove. That's the way o' home makin' boys. Once start 'n' thar's no end to the things ye want."

"And now you going to live here mister?" Orlo asked eagerly.

"Wal, mebbe one winter to see how I like it,"

came the smiling answer. "Mebbe I'll git oneasy by then 'n' start off once more."

"Be you a trapper fer a living?" Jim next asked more boldly. "Folks said you were. I know where ye can catch mus'rats, lots on em," he continued hurriedly, as if this man needed pacifying. "Orlo and I caught ten last fall, and he got a mink too."

"And we had a fox eat up one mus'rat," Levi added anxiously. "We come onto him doin' it." Then the old trapper glanced down into the three eager faces watching him and began to laugh.

"I kin see I've found friends," he said, 'n' mebbe we'll hev a lot o' fun when trappin' time comes. Mebbe we'll hev some 'fore that too. Wait till I hev a chance to look 'round." And that smiling exchange was the beginning of a kinship, a boon comradeship between this wise old woodsman and those three boys, who remained to sit upon his small piazza for hours being so enthralled by his marvelous stories that they lost all consciousness of time. Never before in their lives had they met one so quaint of speech, so wise in woodlore, so full to the brim with wildwood stories. And the range they covered was equally marvelous, for there was not one wild animal on the North American continent they had ever read about, he had not met and captured. He was

also familiar with the various tribes of Indians in the far west, together with most of its mountains, lakes and cataracts. To them, whose horizon had been bordered by the low ranges around Oakham, such a marvelous man, even if he wore no necktie, became a hero beyond compare. They lost no time in sounding his praises, and time and again the three boys were questioned by the Old Guard—the village news bureau—as to whether this unique hero of theirs had let fall a hint of where he was born, why he had become a wanderer, why he had halted at Oakham, and how long he meant to stay. But upon all these points they were totally in the dark; they only knew that he was a wonderful old woodsman, not only willing but anxious to lead them afield; to open for them the thrilling book of forest lore and teach them its marvels.

This he did from that morning onward, always with due regard for their own home duties. In fact not once did either of the three boys present themselves to him ready for any trip, but he would ask, "Did your folks say you could come 'n' how long kin ye stay away?" He began a sly inquiry also into their own home life, and its duties, especially Orlo's. What crops were planted and their prospects; his school life and how far he had progressed in study and what his

hopes, plans, and ambitions were. Once that first summer when alone with Orlo he gave him a bit of fatherly advice well worth quoting and one that set the boy thinking as nothing had before.

"You're all your mother's got to plan on, Orlo, you 'n' your sister, in her old age," he said. 'N' you've got to grow up 'n' be the man o' the house too, don't forgit that. You've got to think o' what's 'spected o' ye a good deal arlier 'n' most boys so ye must try 'n' feel yerself a man fer that. Fishin' 'n' trappin' 'n' havin' fun in the woods is all right, a little on't; but it ain't what ye've got to grow up for. 'Stead o' that it's to git your schoolin' ez fast ez ye kin 'n' all the time think your most a man 'n' must feel 'n' act like one. That's what your mother is hopin' 'n' you got to help her in it. Things might a bin different but they wan't, so ye got to take 'em ez they are 'n' make the best outen 'em. 'N' doin' your duty in life ez it comes without complainin' is all that's worth praisin' in any one, mind that Orlo."

There was another thought in the boy's mind, an increasing astonishment that such a nice old fellow with plenty of money should come here, take up his abode in such quarters and live as he seemed satisfied to do, in one room but little better than a sheep pen. Still more astonishing to Orlo was the fact that his mother, always watch-

ful of his associates, should allow him to become intimate with this really queer hermit. Jim and Levi had been cautioned against him by their parents, but the fact that he had put money in the bank, together with his general acceptance as a harmless old recluse, had caused them to relent. But Orlo had not been constrained by one word since being brought home pig-a-back by Old Renus and the why of it seemed past understanding.

To the three boys, and to Orlo especially this much criticized hermit soon became an ideal hero, a tutor in all wood lore, and the most companionable old fellow ever known. He led them on sucker spearing trips by night, to the cascading brooks where trout darted, to the old mill pond where pouts and perch abounded, to coon hunts and corn roasts in early autumn, and when the nut-brown woods were ripe, to the joys of squirrel shooting, and snare and trap setting. When chilly evenings came, his fireside became a Mecca for them, and the nuts and apples he served, and the stories he told, seemed exhaustless. And so the seasons came and vanished, each bringing its own peculiar charm, always made more zestful by this fine old Nature worshiper to his well-beloved boys, until that fatal September day when they were shot skyward in an escaped balloon, the greatest horror that had ever fallen upon Oakham!

CHAPTER III

THE first faint light of dawn outlined the narrow sandy shore of a forest-bordered lake, when Old Renus and the three boys, sorely cramped but hilarious, crawled out of their wicker basket. Then what an almost insane whoop of joy echoed across that placid sheet of water! The boys screamed, shouted, turned handsprings on the sand, hugged one another and Old Renus, whose eyes grew misty from the supreme happiness of their escape. By a miracle almost, they had landed on the shore of a sequestered lake, where it was they knew not, in fact they did not care, they only knew that they were safe after an awful night of terror and once more on dear Mother Earth.

A fire of driftwood was soon started, and never before did the chilled boys realize how great a blessing crackling, cheery flames could seem. As the morning light grew brighter they saw their runaway balloon, a limp, flat, yellow bag prone on

the rocks and low scrub spruce close by, while over the tops of a dense forest, trailed its tethering rope. An unrippled, mile wide, lake of oval shape, bounded by a dense green wilderness lay before them. A brook close by tinkled and splashed down a narrow dingle over mossy rocks, while a red squirrel chattered far away in the forest.

"Wal, here we be boys alive and safe once more." Old Renus drew a long breath. "But whar we be I haint no idee. Purty well up in Canada I callate. I s'pose ye're hungry, ain't ye?"

"Hungry!" exclaimed Orlo, "why I'm most starved! But what we goin' to git to eat?"

"Wal, that's the question," rejoined Old Renus slowly and looking around once more. "But don't git skeered. We're in a pretty bad scrape but we ain't a goin' to starve. It'll be a case o' woodchuck with us howsomever. We've got to hustle now!"

"'N' now let's round up things," he added a moment later. "Got yer jack knives hev ye?" An inventory developed the fact that all their personal belongings consisted of three Barlow knives the boys owned, a sheath knife Old Renus always carried, and a box containing just twenty-seven matches!

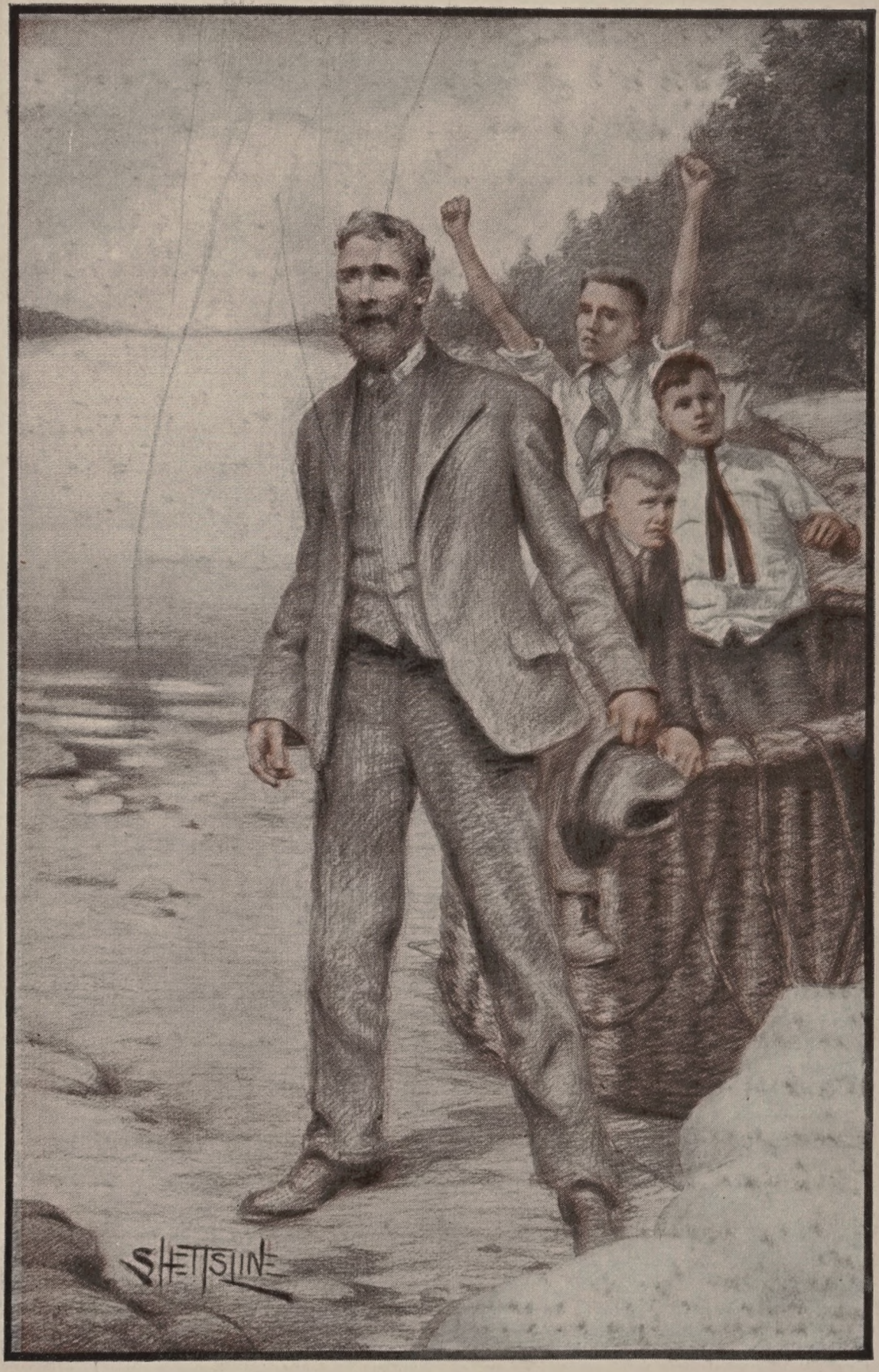
A more than scanty outfit to obtain food and

shelter in a vast wilderness, as Old Renus realized.

"Be we goin' to get out of the woods do you think?" Orlo asked and with Jim and Levi watched Old Renus anxiously for his reply.

"Wal sometime, I callate," he answered vaguely, "but not right away. Fust I dunno whar we are. Mebbe four or five hundred miles from any settlement. To start now with only small knives to get a livin' with, means starvin' to death sure boys. We kin go at it here 'n' do it. But that's our only show till we kin build a canoe 'n' git a stock o' meat or smoked fish to live on a month mebbe. 'N' winter way up here comes in 'bout two months now. I callate too we may hev to stay here 'till spring; ez I told ye boys we got to hustle now. The fust thing is to get suthin' to eat. The next, build a cabin. 'N' we got to rig some shelter out o' that balloon to start on 'n' one to keep a fire goin' all the time. We jest mustn't use another match till we're obliged to. Now pick up 'n' fetch all the dry wood ye kin while I look 'round." And that blunt assertion of their situation outlined it in full. They were evidently marooned in a vast wilderness somewhere between the St. Lawrence River and Hudson Bay, with only summer clothing and four small knives to sustain life with. Also a merciless winter scarce two months away!

But Old Renus did not even hint to his well be-



"By a miracle . . . they had landed on the shore of a sequestered lake"

loved boys how desperate their situation was!

He was well inured to hardships himself; he could travel and live quite comfortably in a wilderness for months in summer, with a camp ax, rifle, blanket, matches, can of salt and bag of hard tack; if a chunk of salt pork, a can of coffee and a few tin dishes were added, his comfort became luxury. But now, he had three healthy, hungry boys totally unused to real wilderness life on his hands, and just then, as if to taunt that brave old woodsman and those hungry boys, a big buck deer and a doe emerged from the woods, looked curiously at the group around the little fire, then walked leisurely away along the sandy shore. This incident assured Old Renus they must be far in a wilderness where no hunter ever came.

But food of some sort must soon be obtained, and after the boys began gathering fuel along the lake shore, Old Renus started up the narrow ravine adown which the brooklet came purling, soon to be rewarded by finding a shallow pool almost alive with chub and small suckers! But how to catch them was the question.

Only for one moment was Old Renus puzzled, then he hastened back to the lake shore, called to the boys, and soon a triangular piece of the empty balloon was cut from it, pieces of the network of cords taken and untwisted, and a funnel-shaped

bag with an oval hoop made of two willow stems to hold its broad end open, and a netting of cord over its small end, was constructed.

"We'll hev fish fer breakfast, boys," Old Renus announced gleefully, leading the way back to the pool, and adjusting his rude fish trap in the small stream below it, soon succeeded in driving a few dozen of them into it. These were cleaned hastily, the fire freshened, and soon the four hungry ones were broiling small fish skewered on the ends of long sticks.

The first problem of their situation was thus solved for a short time at least.

Then Old Renus once more went prospecting.

He had noticed an opening in the forest up beyond this brook pool, and hastening to it, was both astonished and pleased to come upon a four acre pond with a high ledge along its northern side, and beyond that a lower one of up-jutting slate. Just across, to the right, lay a broad strip of sedge with a rim of thick growing cattails. A flock of ducks was swimming along in front of this, and beyond and up from this area of sedge lay what appeared to be an open vale in the wilderness. Then Old Renus emitted a "Wal, by cracky, if this ain't luck!" for, keen woodsman that he was, he saw, close at hand, the material to build a cabin sure to keep them warm and dry

even during a Canadian winter; for he felt quite sure they were destined to stay there until spring came again.

So overjoyed was he that he almost leaped along in front of the ledge, above which towered the dense spruce forest, to find a level open spot; and then went on to the ridge of slate. Much of that was loose, irregular slabs one to two feet broad and a half inch thick. More could be easily split off, he knew, and in his mind's eye he saw a slate cabin, built in front of the protecting ledge and facing south, with a fireplace and chimney, bunks made of saplings and beds of dry sedge grass. Also a slate table with sapling benches around it. And best of all their empty balloon could be cut up for bedclothes.

But the problem of food was the most vital of all.

A fairly comfortable shelter seemed assured. Fuel was plenty. Fish could be caught in abundance for two months yet and a winter store cured with smoke. But he knew it would be almost a miracle if four civilized human beings lived through a rigorous northern winter on smoked fish only.

"We got to git meat or starve," he said to himself, shaking his head. Then, continuing on around the pond, he came upon a small flock of partridges

so tame they merely ran up a narrow opening in the woods, and halted to watch him curiously. "Well, I kin snare you, my speckled beauties," he thought, recalling the net which covered the balloon.

As if to still further assure him, a jack rabbit hopped out of a coppice and stood looking at him with timid eyes. He kept on however, crouching low to avoid alarming this big, white hare, and circling around the pond he came upon what had looked like sedge grass but really was wild rice and fully ripe.

Then Old Renus exclaimed in glad astonishment, "Wal, this is the best luck of all! The Lord is good to us fer sartin." Returning to the lake again, he called his family to him.

"Wal, boys," he assured them almost hilariously, "we are sartinly the luckiest castaways that ever was," then he explained how and why this was so. "The fust thing to do," he added, "is to set some snares fer them tame partridges, 'n' then go at that wild rice. The next heavy rain that comes 'll beat it all off, so it's a case o' hustle now. We are goin' to pull out o' this scrape 'n' live to tell on't. But we got to work like puttin' out fire fer the next two months."

But work of the kind these hardy farm boys now foresaw, was but sport for them, and best

of all they also saw by the smiling face of their old hero, that he had faith in his own assertions.

"You was some afraid we'd starve, wan't you, Uncle Renus?" Orlo queried.

"Wal, to be honest, I war," he answered slowly, "and we ain't all out o' danger yit. We've got 'bout two months to git ahead o' the game, 'n' arter that, it's keep warm if we kin 'n' live on a little. We are sure o' rice puddin' 'n' smoked fish fer a spell, howsomever."

"And we ain't agoin' to try to git home this fall then?" Jim asked anxiously.

"Why, no, boy, 'twould be a fool thing to try," Old Renus answered firmly. "We've got a fair chance to pull through if we stay here'n hustle. But to start out now to go we don't know how far, would mean starvin' sure. We're jest prisoners here, till we kin lay in a store o' grub to last all winter sure 'n' build a canoe in the spring."

The collapsed balloon was then taken in hand. One half was cut into bed quilt pieces and all carried up to the spot Old Renus had selected for a cabin in front of an upright ledge. He next led the way to a cluster of white birches beside the patch of wild rice, and with his big knife managed to cut down and trim a dozen of them. He then set Jim and Levi to cutting armfuls of the wild rice, which was not quite ripe enough to shell out—

and to spreading it to dry on the big section of the balloon, while he and Orlo began rigging a temporary shelter with the smaller pieces. A few armfuls of driftwood which the boys had gathered, was next brought up from the lake shore, an open fireplace of slate slabs set up in front of the shelter, a burning brand and more fuel then fetched up and a new fire started in the unique, half open fireplace. Then with so much camp work done, he and Orlo joined the other two boys at the little rice swamp. They worked with a will, each one far harder than ever in a home grain field, for by this time the boys fully realized what Old Renus had assured them, that it was a case of "woodchuck" and every moment of daylight must be utilized in almost frantic work.

The sun was nearly down to the treetops when Old Renus called a halt. He and Orlo went down to the brook pool to secure a mess of small fish while the others hunted for more driftwood, and soon Orlo was cooking their pitiful supper while the rest cut a bough bed of fir twigs. While doing this, Old Renus, always on watch for any trifle to be of use, came upon a big pine tree that had exuded long strips of pitch which was now dry and hard. These he peeled off with his knife and carried to the shelter.

But that supper of browned and scorched fish without salt, and with water in a bark cup, was not, to say the least, an appetizing one.

"We might be wuss off, jest a day back we war," Old Renus assured the boys, smilingly. "We are on earth now and safe. Then we wan't. 'N' I count that ez worth starvin' fer a few days anyway. We got to count our blessin's now, boys, 'n' middlin' often too," he added munching away on a bit of dry tasteless fish. "'N' we mustn't git blue 'n' down-hearted. That'll never do. We got to live like Injuns now'n I'm thankful we kin. I tell ye, boys, thar war a spell last night, when we war up the highest, I'd 'bout gin up hope. Now I've got it all back. I tell ye, boys, we're goin' to git out o' this scrape if we keep well. We got to watch out fer that, howsomever."

Then this optimistic old woodsman cut a few bits of tobacco from a small plug, rolled them between his palms, scraped every particle into a cob pipe and lit up with a burning twig. It was the first time the boys had seen him smoke since they had entered the ill-fated balloon. He next began untwisting pieces of cord from the balloon and started to braid them into snares. He also unwound fine copper wire from its basket for the same use, while the boys watched him curiously.

"I've got to look for suthin' to make fishhooks

on tomorrow," he said, smiling at the eager faces about him. "This pond is plum' full o' trout. I've seen dozens breakin' water today. 'N' we've got to rig a pool to keep 'em in too, fer winter. Like that won't ye, boys? 'N' I must hunt fer a salt lick too. We jest got to hev salt."

But those boys, wearied as never before in their lives, soon crawled under their rude shelter to fall asleep at once. Then Old Renus banked his precious fire and joined them.

CHAPTER IV

TRUE to the habit of his life, Old Renus woke up at daylight and crawled out from under the shelter. He whittled a few kindlings and soon had a cheery blaze started in the slate fireplace. Then he looked around.

A thin cover of fog hid the little lake in front. A quack of many ducks came from it. A crow perched on a dead tree at its head, cowed raucously. From far away on the long lake below, came the human "halloo" of a loon. An antlered buck emerged from the woods just across the lake and began feeding in the border of the rice patch. Old Renus, adding fuel to his fire, sat down to warm his hands and think. A good many serious problems faced him. Fish and game were plentiful, but as yet he had no means to secure any for food except a few partridges, rabbits, and the small fish in their pool in the brook. These were available until snow came, and then what? They could, he now knew, build a stone

and slate hut and make it fairly comfortable. They would probably gather a bushel or so of wild rice which was a godsend. He might find a deer lick and secure a small amount of salt. A pool in the brook could be made ready to keep a few trout for winter use. But all these means to sustain life, would not avail a month after snow came. And so, wise in all wood lore, Old Renus now felt, as he would put it, "up a stump," and a high one at that.

He saw also, that they must absolutely catch and smoke all the fish and game possible before snow came. If that could be made to last through the long, cold winter, well and good. If not, it meant starvation.

He did not think of himself, but of the three young lives now absolutely in his care. It would never do to let them get discouraged or despondent. That must not occur if it could be prevented. Just then they came from the shelter.

"Slept good, did ye, boys?" he queried, smiling cheerfully.

"I didn't wake up once," Orlo answered. "Or I," Jim added. "Did you, Uncle Renus?"

"Slept like a bug in a rug," he responded. "'N' in two days we're goin' to hev a roof to sleep under, beds o' hay 'n' a stove in our cabin. Now let's go ketch some fish fer breakfast."

But in spite of his anxiety to keep the boys in good spirits, the small brook chub and suckers without salt, were tasteless to them. The first two meals, famished as they had been, were passable; but now, munching the insipid, half-cooked fish, it was inevitable that they should recall their own home fare—the ham and eggs, baked beans with well browned pork, chicken potpie, rye bread with plenty of butter, mother's pantry with its jars of pickles and crisp doughnuts. The shelf of assorted pies and jams. They sighed disconsolately as they thought of all those goodies.

But not a word of complaint did they utter.

"We got to hustle 'n' dig now, boys, every minute o' daylight," Old Renus again asserted after the miserable food was eaten. "Fust Orlo 'n' I'll go 'n' set all the snares I've rigged, then go at hut buildin' while you, Jim and Levi, git after the wild rice ag'in. I want every stalk o' that cut 'n' piled on our big half o' the balloon today. We'll need it all." And so the day's work was planned.

Before starting, however, Old Renus wrapped his precious box of matches in a bit of the oiled silk, and hid them under a shelf of rock so no harm could come to them; then he and Orlo started for the dingle at the head of the lake. A little brook came down this and was alive with small trout. Up this brook, a few rods, the narrow ravine

broadened out and here Old Renus and Orlo built the usual two-foot-high brush fence across it and set four snares. Further on, in a blowdown, now a tangle of fallen and rotting tree trunks half-hidden by white birch and scrub spruce, they halted to construct another short fence, and set four more snares. A third one was built between the roots of a long fallen tree and an abutting cliff across the brook, and then Old Renus, with eyes and ears ever alert, pushed on.

"Thar's cats here, lots on 'em," he announced, pausing at the foot of a low, thick-topped, yellow birch and examining the many claw marks on its smooth bark. "'N' b'ars too," he added, coming to a beech tree with an open space beneath it. "Thar's whar one rooted like a pig to find nuts not long ago." Then to Orlo's surprise, he turned to a little group of young white birches and cut two stout clubs.

"The cats won't bother us," he responded to Orlo's anxious question, "so long ez they kin git 'nuff to eat. But arter snow comes, we got to watch out fer 'em. By that time, however, b'ars'll be asleep fer winter." He kept on some fifty rods more, crawling through the interminable tangle of fallen trees and scrub stuff, always keeping the brook within sound, when suddenly he halted, crouched low, and drew Orlo down beside him.

"See that?" he whispered, pointing to a dead tree trunk sloping upward out of the bushes.

And peeping, breathless, Orlo saw a mottled animal, the size of a large dog, with pointed ears and big yellow eyes, stretched upon the sloping trunk not two rods away and glaring at them!

"We best go back," Old Renus whispered, and back they crawled, much to Orlo's relief, for this was the first time he had ever seen a lynx in its native haunts.

"I'd give its weight in gold fer a rifle jest now," Old Renus asserted, after they had crawled back some ten rods, and a deer had startled Orlo by jumping out from behind a stump, and then halting to watch them. "Game's plenty, here, all sorts," Old Renus whispered again. I've seen lots o' deer tracks this mornin'. 'N' they're tame too, never seen 'em so tame. Nobody ever bin here arter 'em, I callate."

"Can't we trap one," Orlo asked anxiously. "Raw meat would taste good to me now."

"We'll git one somehow," Old Renus answered cheerfully, feeling the same craving. "Mebbe I kin rig a lasso. I used to throw one middlin' good when I war a cowboy." Coming to the brook again, he shouted, "Hooray, this is luck," and kneeling, began to paw into an out-jutting bank. "Blue clay," he exclaimed exultingly, mashing a

bit of it between his fingers. "Now we kin hev suthin' to cook in. 'Rah fer our side, Orlo."

Luck did seem to be coming their way that day, for on returning to the last snare fence, built not an hour before, two partridges were found alive with nooses fast about their necks. Another rewarded them in the next fence and two more, with a fat rabbit, had been caught in the first one built. Then Orlo gave a loud "whoop" and began to dance. To him, a hearty, hungry boy of fourteen who had eaten nothing but fish, for two days, a feast seemed now just ahead.

Old Renus was not long in making that "seeming" real after camp was reached, and within a few minutes four of the birds were dressed, cut up, and cooking upon a slab of slate. Jim and Levi were then called from their rice harvesting.

They had eaten many meals of fish and game with their wondrous old hero. Brook trout, or pickerel fried brown in pork fat with warmed up potatoes, good bread and butter, and coffee; fat coons baked brown in his big oven with all the same side features, broiled partridges and squirrels, but never one game feast had tasted half as good as these fat birds grilled on slate, and devoured without salt or aught else.

"We'll fetch the rice over here now 'n' spread on our balloon next, to ketch what shells off as it

dries," Old Renus directed, as soon as the meal was devoured. "'N' fer shelter fer a night or two, we'll rig up some spruce bark 'n' boughs. We got to save that rice fust, anyway."

Go at it they did with a vim, and so hard did all four work that over an acre of wild rice was cut with pocket-knives, carried around the little lake and piled high upon half of the balloon before sunset.

A bark and bough shelter was next constructed, and while Jim and Levi were sent to the brook pool for more small fish, Old Renus and Orlo visited the snares once more. Three birds were caught in the first two, and hurrying on to the third snare, Old Renus almost ran onto a huge wild cat busy devouring a partridge that had been caught in it. The vicious animal glared at him a moment, quite defiantly, then seizing its stolen prey, sneaked away in the undergrowth.

"Dern yer picter," Old Renus ejaculated, stooping to repair the fence. "If thar's one thing I want more 'n all else, jest now, it's a gun."

Orlo, however, was a good deal more scared than he was. In fact, with twilight coming on, and being a quarter of a mile from camp, the incident was enough to make even a sturdy farm boy feel afraid.

"Was it the one we saw?" he whispered as they turned back.

"No, that war a lucivee, 'n' this war jest a bobcat 'n' neither on 'em any danger now," Old Renus returned, assuringly, "so don't git skeered, Orlo, ye got to git used to them critters here."

Later, however, squatting by the crude stove, watching Old Renus grill the small fish and two more birds, Orlo related this incident to Jim and Levi and told just how he felt, while they listened breathlessly. Just then, as if to accentuate the episode, there came to them from across the lake, a snarling "yaaoul" that made the boys shiver with fear. Another call of the same tenor answered from the blowdown, and both being so near, together with the gathering darkness, made them quake with fear.

"Be we in any danger, Uncle Renus?" Orlo whispered anxiously, while Jim and Levi crept a little closer.

"No, boy, I tell ye no!" the old man returned sharply. "Thar ain't a mite o' danger from them cussed cats now, not till snow comes. 'N' then thar ain't much less ye corner one. Ez fer tonight, let 'em growl. Ye couldn't drive one within ten rods o' our fire with dogs. All I care is thar eatin' up the birds we ketch, fer we need 'em the worst way.

"Ye got to git used to them cusses," he added again a moment later, passing a section of grilled bird and a fish to each of the scared boys. "'N' ye've got to sleep good, keep yer spirits up 'n' leave the rest to me. When thar's any danger brewin' I'll tell ye. All we need think on now is to git a hut built 'n then hustle to git grub stored away. I'm goin' try'n lassoo a deer tomorrow. I think it kin be done. If we kin git two or three deer'n jerk the meat, we're safe."

"Thar's a pile o' work to be done, boys," he continued, after lighting his pipe for his once-a-day smoke and beginning to untie a long piece of the heavy silk cord that had enmeshed their balloon. "Stuns o' all sizes ye kin lift, hez got to be fetched to build the walls o' a cabin. I'm goin' to use slate fer a roof. We got to fetch a lot o' the blue clay I found up the brook to chink the walls and make some dishes out'n. I kin make a pot to boil in, a pan to fry in, 'n' plates to eat on, all out o' that clay. 'N' if I kin only git a deer, boys, you'll see me dancin' jigs, fer we'll be in clover then."

He worked with a will now, this resourceful old woodsman, untying hard knots in the heavy silk cord, then untwisting them and rubbing the kinks with a bit of spruce gum, in the light of his pine knot beside the fire, and within an hour he had

his lasso all ready for use. Then helped by the boys, he began to make more snares.

"I tell ye, boys," he said while doing this, "that balloon hez proved a perfect godsend to us. 'Twas a pizen thing, to 'a' so shot us up skyward, till we near froze, but now think what it means to us. Without it, I think we'd 'a' starved here. O' course, I c'ud 'a' made snares out o' our shirts in a pinch, but no hopes o' gittin' a deer. Now I hev. Now I kin see a good chance o' plenty o' meat 'n' skins to make clothes on. We're goin' to hev beds full o' moss to sleep on. Pillows filled with feathers 'n' comforters moss-lined to sleep under. We'll hev bunks filled a foot deep with rice hay 'n' 'nuff left to thatch our slate roof six inches thick. Oh, I've got the whole business all mapped out 'n' don't git skeered by yowlin' cats. We're all right, and now let's turn in."

So cheered were those boys by his optimistic outlook, and so tired withal, they felt no further alarm when another cat yowled out of the dark wilderness, but slept, even as they would at home.

CHAPTER V

TRUE to his plans and the need of hustling, Old Renus was up and out of the bark shelter at dawn, and had the four quarters of the jack rabbit broiling when the boys emerged. Then, taking a double handful of the ashes he had poked out before starting the fire, he led the way to the lake to show them how woodsmen can wash without soap. And this was only one of the many lessons in woodcraft the boys were soon to learn.

They were witnesses to another one after breakfast for then Old Renus wound cord about his body and legs; next began to thatch himself with short spruce boughs, until a front view, he much resembled a six foot tall scrub spruce.

"Don't go out o' sight o' the lower brook or the big lake shore in huntin' fer stuns," he cautioned the boys, coiling his lassoo properly; ready now to start for a deer. "You'll find plenty 'long the brook 'n' on the lake shore now it's low. Jest hustle, o' course, but don't try 'n' fetch too big

ones." Then with his hunting knife handy to draw quick, he strode away.

"By Jiminy, I'd like to follow and see how he does it!" Orlo ejaculated, watching him enter the woods.

"Me too," echoed Jim, with equal admiration. "Say, but what he don't know 'bout huntin' ain't wuth knowin'!"

"We are goin' to owe our lives to him," added Levi, who for his years was quite a thinker.

"We'd 'a' starved certain," rejoined Orlo, "but now I'm sure we won't. And when we get the cabin built what a heap of fun we're goin' to have snarin' partridges. Why, they're thicker'n sparrows up in that blowdown, and so tame you could knock 'em over with a pole." Then, loyal to their hero's direction after stones, they went on the run. Close by at first, along the shore of the small lake they fetched them slowly, as they must, and scampered back for more. In an hour of the liveliest hustling, having brought all the available stones from around the small lake, they began on the moss-coated ones down the brook vale. Meantime, they kept watching anxiously for Old Renus to emerge from the woods, hoping to see him bearing the hunter's best prize; a deer on his back.

It was over two hours before he did appear,

but no deer was on his shoulders. He only had half a dozen birds in one hand.

"I did the trick, hooray," he shouted, tossing the birds under the shelter and executing a few jig steps. "Got a good-sized buck, too, with horns," he added, beginning to shed his spruce thatching. "Now we'll all go 'n' fetch him in." Then those astonished and joyful boys noticed that the old hunter's hands and arms were red with blood!

"'Twas middlin' lively work to git up to that buck 'n' slash his throat arter I'd yanked him over 'n' 'fore he could git up agin," he explained, as they kept close behind him up into the blowdown. "He war nibblin' wintergreen leaves jest at the foot o' the lopped-over tree when I spied him 'n' I got up to 'bout four rods 'fore he even looked up. He didn't mind me then, cal'latin' I war spruce scrub I s'pose, 'n' so I kept creepin' up a half step at a time till I wan't ten feet away. Then he looked up ag'in 'n' the next second my lasso war 'round his neck. I give it an awful tug ez he jumped 'n' over he went. 'N' the next he knew I'd slashed his throat wide open."

"We've got venison 'nuff to last more 'n' a month," he added buoyantly, as they came up to the prize, "'sides a skin that'll make two o' you a suit each. 'N' I'll hev a couple o' fishhooks cut out

o' his horns 'fore I sleep. I tell ye, boys, we're in luck!"

Two stout birch poles were cut to carry the deer to camp, then Jim and Levi began gathering stones again, while Old Renus and Orlo set about getting slate slabs and spruce bark to make a smoke house. Clay from the bank up beside the brook was also fetched in one of their silk blankets, and soon Old Renus had his promised dishes shaped and ready for baking, while the boys halted their work to watch him curiously. They were fast learning more wood lore than they had ever dreamed of.

Late that afternoon, when the red sun once more sank below the enclosing forest, they all quit their hard work, to enjoy a wash in ashes and sand on the lake shore; then those boys, content now and more assured of their safety with keen anticipation watched Old Renus grilling slices of venison on his slab of slate. And that supper, although of hot meat only, was for many reasons, the most satisfying and most enjoyable they had so far eaten.

They felt a sense of security also, for, shut in as they were with a dense wilderness all about, the ledge just back of them was a protection, while the lake in front, now reflecting the stars, completed their defense from all night prowlers.

The big pile of stones and plenty of slate were handy to construct a warm and secure cabin that no yowling lynx or wildcat could enter. A fine buck hung in a cleft of rock to feast upon for a long time; half a dozen fat partridges were under cover, and plenty more in the woods, sure to be caught; in short, they now felt assured of what their wise old hero had promised, a crude but safe wildwood home with food aplenty, and warm skins to cover them when snow came.

Two or three times that evening the now familiar "yaoul" of bob cat or lynx came from far away, but they gave it scant heed. Instead, while watching Old Renus deftly cutting, scraping and fashioning a fishhook from an antler prong, visions came of pulling big trout out of the lakelet, and as a sequence, building a little dam in the brook in which to keep them alive. Many a time they had planned to do these very things when they grew up to manhood and escaped from the old farm. Now this part of their dream was to be realized. True, most of all else pertaining to that wildwood idyl was missing—the canoe, the guns, traps, the log cabin, etc.; but the trout were here in plenty. Game birds, deer, and fur bearing animals too. Old Renus with his wondrous woodcraft had captured the first two camp life needs, and now they felt quite sure he was capable

of securing a few lynx and possibly a bear. In fact there seemed to be no limit to what he could do in the woods.

But their eyelids began to droop by the time he had fashioned two coarse fishhooks; the fire had burned low, and feeling safe and sure of protection, they crawled under cover and soon fell asleep.

But Old Renus did not follow. Instead he added a few sticks to the dying fire and began to ponder. First, over their position and its many dangers.

The dangers did not at present cause him serious alarm. He felt the need of caution, and that the boys must not be allowed to go into the woods alone. Later on he knew there would be danger from the fierce Canadian lynx. He was satisfied there were plenty hereabout. He and Orlo had come upon a big one. He had seen their tracks and scratch marks in many places, and from the night calls he knew they must be numerous. He also began to worry about wolves, the most dangerous of wild animals in this far northern wilderness. Up to this night, though always alert, he had not heard one.

He gave most thought, however, to the problem of their possible position. If they were on the St. Lawrence watershed, to canoe out in the

spring would be quite easy. If north of that, and the outlet of the big lake was towards Hudson Bay, it was a different and more serious matter.

The abundance and tameness of all game and wild animals so far, proved that few, if any, hunters or trappers had ever come here.

So Old Renus felt cause for serious worry just now. All this he pondered over for half an hour, then, as usual, banking his fire well and carefully with ashes and bits of slate, he turned and crawled under cover, but just then he heard the faint sound of scratching-up back on the ledge.

He paused to hear it repeated, then stepped to the right, watching and listening. One, two, three steps like a cat he took and then, above and close to the ledge crest and glistening in the starlight, he saw two big yellow eyes glaring down at him!

CHAPTER VI

WHEN Old Renus saw those vicious lynx eyes it only confirmed his fears that this wilderness was infested by those dangerous night prowlers, and that probably no trappers ever came here. He had surmised they had been swept far into the Canadian wilderness, and now he was positive of it, and that their situation was more desperate than he dared tell the boys. He was not much alarmed just now, however, but stooping, picked up a stone and hurled it fair at the two gleaming eyes, to hear the creature give a spiteful snarl and leap back into darkness. Then he dragged his much prized deer under the bark and bough shelter.

He stood up after this to look over the dimly visible lake and around the dark enclosing forest and listen with an eerie, uncanny feeling, and a heartfelt wish for his trusty rifle.

Just then, from far away in the black, somber forest, came the low, quavering howl of a wolf!

Now for the first time since he stepped out of that ill-fated balloon, Old Renus felt a sudden chill of fear.

A half-starved lynx might spring upon a man unawares, but he knew full well that not even a volley from rifles would halt or drive away a band of hungry wolves.

"We've got to make our stone hut wolf-proof!" he said to himself, listening long and intently, "'n' stock it fer a long siege, mebbe. If ever a pack o' them devils come 'round, we're jailed till spring." He waited still longer, listening eagerly, anxiously, almost tremblingly, but no more ominous howls coming out of the darkness, he crawled under the shelter.

In the morning the boys naturally asked why they had found the deer under cover, but Old Renus passed the matter by quite readily.

"I got thinkin' a cat might come 'round in the night," he answered lightly, "'n' I didn't callate on havin' our good venison clawed 'n' chewed by one o' them varmints."

"We've got to git our meat smokin' the fust thing," he announced, after a goodly breakfast of it had been grilled and eaten, and at once he and Orlo set about it, while Jim and Levi went after stones again. A dozen or more small white birches were secured, cut into ten foot lengths,

then lashed two by two at the top with ends projecting. These in turn were set up tent-shape with a ridge pole to hold them in position. Two tiers of smaller cross pieces were lashed to these and the skeleton of a smoke house was thus constructed. This was next covered with sections of spruce bark held in place by slabs of slate, a fire hole was dug under one end of the structure, a slate slab laid over that, and an almost exact reproduction of what Indians use to cure meat in was now ready. An hour later Old Renus had most of his deer cut in long strips; these were hung on the crossbars, and a smudge smoke started in the fire hole. To expedite the curing and save smoke, he also cut and laid a mat of spruce boughs over the entire creation. With so much camp work done, he and Orlo visited their snares to secure three birds and find that two more had been devoured by "them pesky cats," as Old Renus called their yellow-eyed neighbors.

"I'd gin five dollars apiece fer steel traps jest now," he asserted, after repairing the two sections of torn fence. "But they ain't to be had, I s'pose," he added, sighing. "All we kin do is tend the snares often 'n' catch ez catch can. Arter we git our cabin built, we'll set some over tother side o' the pond fer luck. Mebbe we can dodge the cats that way." Then after a midday meal

of grilled deer bones, for Old Renus would not waste an ounce of meat, the one most important need of all now, a cabin, was begun.

Old Renus planned to use a section of sloping ledge for one wall of the cabin, and his first move was to set up a good-sized slate fireplace against the ledge with flat stones to hold it firmly in place. Above this he built his chimney, mainly of bits of slate, up to the ledge top, then began work on the cabin walls. He made them thick and double, stone outside, slabs of slate within, and chinked with clay and fine gravel or shale. It was no easy task to build those walls of rounded stones so they would stay up. They also had to be broad at the base and sloping up from the outside; and this used up so many more stones than the boys had brought that Jim and Levi were kept busy getting more. It took them over three days, working on the jump from sunrise to sunset. But when it was completed, with a sloping roof of overlapping slate, a door consisting of two slabs fitted to slide to and fro behind birch saplings, a two-foot square window of the same, the boys surveyed it with pride and satisfaction. To them it was a most picturesque wildwood abode, far more attractive than the pole and bark wigwam they had once built on the shore of a secluded pond at home.

"It'll keep us warm anyway when snow comes,"

Old Renus asserted, smiling at their admiration and praise. "'N' we needn't worry 'bout cats or other varmints night time either, which is some comfort.

"But we needn't work quite so hard from now on," he added, glancing down at the lake where trout were breaking water. "That is, you boys kin go fishin' 'n' keep watch o' the snares for a change, while I rig up some bunks, lay down a floor of saplin's 'n' build a slate lean-to 'longside to keep our meat 'n' birds in. Fust thing, however, we best go at thrashin' out our rice with sticks. It's dry enough to shell, I notice."

This proved an easy task, and they secured enough of that brown and quite nourishing grain to fill the wicker basket that had brought them into this wilderness. With so much house-build- and housework done, and the sun midway the western horizon, Old Renus led the way towards what appeared to be a gap in the forest opening south from their "pond" as the boys had begun to call it. Here, or at the head of the oval opening, where they had cut wild rice, they followed a dry brook course a few hundred rods upward and then what was probably the bed of a former lake, an open expanse, many miles long and perhaps two wide, lay before them. To the right a low, spruce-clad range bordered it, with a lower

fringe of white-stemmed birches. To left or eastward rose a sharply defined, green-capped ledge, while in front, and stretching away to the horizon line, lay this unique gap. A vast level almost, with patches of stunted spruce here and there and a few low, green hillocks rising out of the wide expanse.

Far beyond, amid what appeared like gray mist, rose a group of dead skeleton trees. And that vast elongated meadow was entirely carpeted with wintergreen.

Here and there deer were calmly feeding. A huge antlered moose was just emerging from the birches a quarter mile away. A few swamp maples midway glowed like crimson flame, and close by, on a dead treetop, was a gray forest eagle.

"Wal,' if this ain't a picter I never saw one," Old Renus exclaimed as they halted to look it over. "'N' talk about game," he added as the familiar "peep-peep" of a pair of partridges close by drew their attention, "why it's a sin not to hev a gun jest now.

"But we kin snare all the birds we want here," he continued, a moment later, "'n' less bother from cats. They allus stick to the timber or a blowdown. Ez fer deer, we might ez well lasso 'em clus to camp 'n' save luggin' 'em a long way.

I tell ye, boys, we ain't goin' to starve this winter nohow!"

It so appeared to those enraptured boys, who never in their lives had seen a sight like this.

"And won't the cats come here?" Orlo asked a little anxiously, as they advanced into the open.

"Wal, not to bother any," Old Renus answered assuringly. "Cats o' all kinds are sneaky critters, 'n' those here, the lynx speshly, never come out into an open. It's the nater o' the varmints to keep hid till they kin spring onto some game." Then he drew his knife and began cutting spruce boughs to build a snare fence and the boys hastened to aid him. One ten rods long was soon run out from an abutting rock to a clump of scrub growth. A half-dozen snares were set, and then they returned to camp.

"We best lay by a big stock o' birds now while birds are goin'," Old Renus asserted as they began getting supper. "I kin fix 'em up so they'll keep till spring, 'n' br'iled partridges are a good deal more consolin' 'n jerked venison that tastes o' smoke. Tomorrow mebbe ye boys better go snare settin' all day 'stead o' fishin'. The fishin' 'll keep a spell longer."

That supper of grilled deer bones with a quarter of a big rabbit for each, lacked only salt to make it palatable. Of course, the boys were be-

ginning to miss many home good things quite seriously, but the one thing most craved was salt.

"I s'pose you're gettin' salt hungry, boys," Old Renus said, divining how it was with them. "I am anyway, though I don't mind ez much ez ye do. I'm cal'latin' to go huntin' fer a deer lick, howsomever, when we git fixed up a little more. I must build a lean-to, ez I said, to keep our meat 'n' birds away from the prowlin' cats. Then comes our bunks, a spare set o' clay dishes, 'n' when we've got grub 'nuff laid away, we must git after a stock o' white birch, 'n' a wood pile with only my big knife to cut with, ain't no joke."

There were other needs of their situation which he knew must be provided for. Two or three deer skins, tanned, to be cut up and fashioned into some sort of garments. A coarse needle of bone to use with unraveled silk cord. A pair of snowshoes and bark or slate snow shovels. In fact, he was woodwise enough to know that situated as they were, even with game aplenty secured, to cook, keep warm and live through a long winter in this far north wildnerness, with snow six to ten feet deep in a temperature below zero, required much preparation and hardy, warm-clad men to do the work. And he had with him three boys with no conception of what a winter here actually meant!

But this wise old woodsman was not given to much meditation. A tremendous task faced him, for he knew he must care for those three boys and take them out of this wilderness with naught but knives and a collapsed balloon to help in the fight!

Now, as soon as supper was eaten, Old Renus freshened his fire to give more light, and set about the making of more snares; the boys, fast learning the many arts of woodcraft, helping him.

To them there were no serious clouds on the horizon. Their stone hut close by, with rice straw knee-deep in it, and a door to be shut, was like a fort, secure against all wilderness prowlers. Snaring birds and fishing on the morrow, besides helping Old Renus, would be joyous sport for them. In fact, all the hard work so far had not seemed work at all, but charming camp making with their fine old hero for leader.

They were getting used to the nightly yowl of wildcats too, and while nothing could have tempted them to go ten rods away from camp after dark, in it they felt as safe as at home.

But Old Renus now had what might be called a far-away cause for worry, and that—wolves. He had heard one the evening previous, and knowing their habits, realized that so long as small game was plenty, they ranged in pairs and seldom howled. But as soon as snow came, they herded

in bands of a dozen or more, the better to attack and kill deer or moose. Also that when they found a trapper's or lumberman's camp, with scent of meat or cooking, they would hang about and haunt it for weeks. So now he was on the alert for them.

Two or three cat yowls came that evening from up in the blowdown. A pair of loons on the big lake below hallooed in usual, human tone. Hoot owls near or far uttered their wierd calls. In fact, all the usual wildwood voices of the night were heard, but scarcely noticed. But when Old Renus, always the last to seek slumber, had banked the fire, then—from across the big lake it came, a faint, but unmistakable wolf howl!

CHAPTER VII

EACH autumn for several years past, Orlo and his two faithful companions had, joining together and taught by Old Renus, built themselves three of the usual farm-boy brush fences to snare partridges in. These were constructed of brush, weeds, tufts of leaves and grass, and were run across a cedar and alder grown brook dingle, perhaps fifty rods wide. They were about two feet high and usually three rods apart. In these fences, holes the size of a partridge were left open. A fine wire or horse-hair noose was next attached to a stout crossbar and hung in due position. A narrow path was cleared along both sides of the fence so that when partridges—which like chickens never fly unless frightened—came to the fence, they naturally followed it to an opening, and the waiting noose. These were visited late each afternoon and from two to three birds captured daily. Now and then an unwise rabbit would run his head into a noose. A fox

or a big hawk would occasionally get ahead of the boys and secure a feast, and so bird snaring, while alluring, was a somewhat precarious sport.

But now when those three boys, each carrying a stout club for possible "cats," and a half-dozen snares, hastened over to this "once was" lake bottom, they found that four of the six snares set the previous afternoon had scored. These were reset and, going on to the right a hundred rods more, another fence was built and snares set. A second one beyond that, running from the bordering white birches to a hillock out in the level of wintergreen leaves, was constructed, and then the boys turned back. Never before had they seen so many partridges, for they were all about, in singles, pairs or in flocks of a half-dozen, and so entirely indifferent to the boys they would not more than get out of their way. In fact, when the boys drew near to their first fence, they spread out, and actually drove a half-dozen birds up to it and saw three of those stupidly tame ones get noosed.

"Jingo, but this is like killing chickens," Orlo exclaimed as they came up to the fluttering birds and wrung their necks.

"I never saw anything like it," Jim added. "I'll bet no hunters ever come here!"

"And I'll bet nobody but us ever did!" Levi added.

"Partridges wouldn't be so tame if they'd ever seen humans afore. If we had fish poles we could noose 'em without building fences."

But it was noon by this time, the boys were hungry, and so, proudly carrying the string of fourteen birds they had secured, and forgetting all fear of cats, they hastened back to camp.

Old Renus had his slate oven set up and clay dishes slowly baking within it. His slate lean-to, held by stout white birch poles up to the cabin roof, was also well under way. A floor of slate had been laid beneath it and two birds he had found in his snares were dressed and ready for cooking.

"Wal, ye had middlin' luck," he announced, smiling, as the boys came up. "But I 'spected it, I never seen birds like over thar in all my life nowhar. Guess you'd better take up our tother snares 'n' set 'em over in the lake bottom."

When their dinner was grilled to a turn, Old Renus once more surprised the boys by sprinkling a powder of browned wintergreen leaves on it.

" 'Tain't salt," he then announced, "but it's the next thing to it. I took a handful o' them leaves 'n' scorched 'em brown to make it. You'll see it'll sorter git rid o' the fresh taste."

It did, and added quite a zest to the browned partridge meat.

"We're goin' to hev rice puddin' fer dinner tomorrow," he next asserted, "'n' mebbe venison stew with wild parsnips in it fer supper. I found a big bed on 'em over in the blowdown. They'll gin the stew a good flavor. 'N' they ain't so wuss to eat either. Kinder peppery, but good just the same when cooked. Oh, we ain't goin' to starve, boys," he concluded. "If only I could kill a b'ar we'd live on the top shelf all winter. I'm goin' to try 'n' figger it out somehow."

And so great was their faith in his woodcraft, they were almost positive bear meat would be the next item on the menu, with a warm bearskin to sleep under, later on.

The boys by this time were duly and fully impressed with the need of securing and storing what food and fuel they could for the long winter so near at hand, and while they tried the bone fishhooks Old Renus had fashioned, and caught a good string of trout, they kept after the snares persistently, cutting small white birches for fuel between times. Old Renus lassoed two more deer by his unique stalking method, smoking most of the meat and tanning the skins by the usual wood-ashes process used by Indians. He built a second lean-to beside the cabin, rigged two bunks and filled them

with rice straw, laid a sapling floor in it, prepared the scores of birds the boys brought in so they would keep, fashioned bone needles with which to make skin garments, and so the wildwood housekeeping continued for two weeks and with no more exciting incident than the nightly cat calls, and an occasional wolf howl noticed but not mentioned by Old Renus. They had secured nearly enough venison and birds to last all winter but their woodpile was still scanty, for cutting down sapling birches with a hunting knife only, was a slow method.

The weather had also favored them with a succession of glorious September days without a cloud and with ambient skies and light south breezes. Each morning the sun rose bright and pale-yellow out of the green forest. Each evening after it vanished, a chill came and a light frost whitened the sedge grass and alders around the lake shore. The few scattered hardwoods grew yellow and crimson. Triangles of wild geese "honk-honked" their way south. Ice began to form around shallow pools and grim winter was evidently creeping nearer. Then one morning Old Renus announced that they would devote the day to a cruise around the shores of the long lake beside which they had landed.

"We'll take along some grilled birds 'n' fried

rice cakes," he asserted, "'n' hev a day off. We've bin hustlin' now every minute fer most a month, 'n' it's time fer a change. Besides I've a notion some trappers may hev come here sometime 'n' we might find suthin' we kin use. I'd give a good deal fer a steel trap jest now to ketch a b'ar with." And so after securing their stores from marauding cats, much to the boys' delight they started.

The long lake beside which they had landed showed it was unusually low, for a two rod wide beach of sand and shale almost surrounded it. The tracks of deer were plenty along this beach, and two deer stood watching them but a few rods away, as they emerged from the woods and started along to the right. Just across the lake a huge moose with wide antlers stood facing them and the rising sun. A buck and two does splashed along the reedy margin beyond him; in fact eight deer and this lord of the forest were now in sight. A big flock of ducks almost blackened the lower end of the lake, and to add a mystic charm, the tiny waves plashed along the sandy margin at their feet.

"Some game, boys, ain't it?" Old Renus said as they moved on. "'N' I never saw deer so tame, or partridges either," he added, as a crested cock hopped up on an outjutting tree root not two rods away and calmly watched them. "It makes me

think nobody's been here for a long time, mebbe years, 'n' I don't like that. We must be a good ways from a settlement, mebbe hundreds o'miles." On nearing the foot of the lake they came to a short passage connecting it with a much larger one. Two green-clad islands rose midway of this, a broader one curving to the right, and apparently ending at a gap due north in a low range of mountains.

"Seems like these lakes hev an outlet the wrong way," Old Renus declared, glancing around the green, undulating horizon line. "I'd hoped it'd run to southard but if it's north we're wuss off'n I cal'lated. It means headin' towards Hudson Bay when we go out. Skin up a tree, Orlo," he added anxiously, "'n' see what ye kin see."

Orlo did so, selecting a tall spruce just back on the bank and soon returned to report that this opening in the mountains appeared to continue on to the north.

"Wal, we won't worry, boys, not yit," Old Renus rejoined, smiling down into the anxious faces upraised to his. "Perhaps the outlet makes a turn a spell on, 'n' runs south arter all. No use crossin' a bridge till we come to it."

But it was a long way around to this apparent outlet, miles in fact, following the in and out curves of the shore. Two streams were found

entering it on the way, the second a quite sizable one, too deep to wade. It was narrow, the water looked black, and it emerged from an overhang of swamp hackmatack and bordering willows. A faint sound of falling water came from far inward. Tiny foam flecks floated slowly out from the shadow, and knowing it was useless to cross this stream to follow the lake outlet, and it being almost noon, Old Renus was about to turn back when his always watchful eyes fell upon a stump of about six-inch diameter projecting across the stream and just above them.

"Somebody cut away that lopped-over tree sometime to git up that brook," he thought, instantly knowing that trappers invariably built their camps near running water. "Guess we'd best foller it up 'n' see what we kin find." And without saying a word to the boys, he led them up its course. It twisted sharply through a quagmire swamp so thickly grown with alders and briars they could scarce crawl through, until a low ledge facing south was reached, around the end of which the brook ran. Here a narrow path up from the stream had once been cut in the brush, moss broken away from a sloping shelf of rock and an opening made just ahead.

In the center of it, in front of a second ledge and facing south, stood a small log cabin!

For one instant even the heart of Old Renus gave an unexpected leap, while the boys gathered close to him, for it seemed as if a ghost was likely to emerge from this hidden away cabin with closed door and one small window hole open like a huge watchful eye. It was the first human sign they had come upon in almost a month!

It had long been vacant, for grass and weeds had grown in front. On one side, the bow of an overturned canoe appeared from beneath a lean-to of birch poles and bark. Beside the closed door lay a small pile of birch and alder wood, and near-by the edge of a rusty ax was sunk into the end of a small log.

"Nobody to hum, that's sartin," Old Renus ejaculated, advancing and peeping into the window hole, half expecting to see a grinning skull; then he pushed at the door to find it fastened. Next, knowing the ways of log cabin builders, he peered around the near corner, drew out a long plug, and pushed the door inward.

And now the home and home life of a trapper stood revealed.

In one corner of the room was a crude fireplace of flat stones with a chimney going through the log roof. A bunk built of sapling birch, filled with dry fir twigs and grass, ran along one side, and upon it lay a pair of gray wool blankets. A hang-

ing shelf of saplings, beneath the window, held a few tin dishes, cups, a coffee-pot, a knife and a fork. In front of this shelf stood a slab bench and up in one corner, nailed to the logs, was a box two feet long with a cover swinging on leather thongs for a door. A tiny pantry closet in fact, with two shelves, and on them three unopened cans of coffee, two of baked beans, a glass jar almost full of salt, five tins of condensed milk and a box of pepper. A blackened tin pail stood beside the fireplace, a frying pan also. Another pail hung from a peg in the wall and a small wire broiler next to that.

All this wildwood life outfit, the simplest possible, was glanced at hurriedly by the visitors, for the hindquarter of a deer almost denuded of meat and gray with mould hung in the corner. A half-dozen bunches of fur pelts depended from the rafters and each exhaled a vile odor.

"Suthin' queer 'bout this," Old Renus asserted, after his hasty look around. "It's a trapper's shack all right 'n' a white man's, too. But it's bin deserted since last spring or mebbe a year longer. 'N' the poor cuss that built it is dead som'ers hereabout. Suthin' happened to him sure's a gun!"

"But what?" queried Orlo anxiously, for to him it was all mysterious and tragic.

"Oh, lots o' things," returned Old Renus, nonchalantly. He might 'a' got ketched in a snow storm out tendin' traps 'n' froze to death. He might a broke a leg goin' over a ledge 'n' starved to death 'fore he could crawl home. Or bein' in the dead o' winter, a big lynx might a tackled him in the woods. Whatever did happen must a bin late in the winter, fer here's a good string o' pelts. He went away carryin' or wearin' snowshoes—they ain't here—'n' that skinned-off deer leg shows he'd lived here quite a spell."

A corroboration of this theory was found back of the cabin, in the shape of two deer heads and many bones gnawed and picked clean. The canoe, which Old Renus next examined anxiously, must have lain there over a year for its bark shelter was rotten and half-crushed down, and feeling of its canvas cover, he found that seemed rotten too. Old Renus, wise to woodlife, glanced around to note many other signs of the lapse of time, visible only to him; two faintly defined paths leading away from the open space where bushes had been cut and others had grown up; many small bones, the skull of a bear and of two more deer bleached white lay along the base of the ledge below the cabin, and many more signs of similar suggestion. To the right of the cabin and built against a ledge stood a cobblestone smoke house covered by a

broad flat stone, and just beyond he found a deep hole walled up with blackened stones, with a bed of ashes and black coal inside.

"Some trapper come here years ago, I cal'late," Old Renus now asserted prophetically, after a long scrutiny of this wildwood cabin inside and out. "He built himself a good warm shack in the fall. He got good and ready fer winter, too, same ez we hev. He probably trapped a b'ar, 'fore they hole fer winter 'n' pickled 'n' smoked his hams. He dug 'n' stoned up a bake hole, too, to bake beans in with a chunk o' salted b'ar fat—it's better'n any pork. 'N' mebbe a b'ar ham also. He must 'a' come here 'bout the time we did fer it ud take one man all o' two months to cut 'n' tote logs to build sech a cabin. He probably found trappin' good here too, 'n' kept comin'. I cal'late by the bed o' chips in front, this cabin must 'a' bin built three or four years. 'N' it's been over a year since he left it on his snowshoes 'n' didn't come back." And then with this wildwood mystery thus explained, Old Renus returned to the canoe for a more critical inspection.

"Cover's as rotten ez punk," he declared after turning it over and examining it carefully. "But the frame's all right. Arter the fust freeze comes we'll come over here 'n' slide it 'long on the ice back with us. We kin then cover it ag'in with a

slice o' our balloon 'n' make it jest ez good ez new. The paddles are all right, too," he added, picking one up. "I tell ye, boys, we're in luck to hev found what we hev here. I'd cal'lated to git out the stuff fer a canoe this winter 'n' cover it in the spring but now we needn't."

He next led the way down to the brook, where their simple dinner was eaten and their thirst quenched.

"We'll hev coffee with our breakfast now fer a spell," he declared, returning to the cabin, "'n' salt on our meat, too.

"Can't we have a taste now?" Orlo asked eagerly. And when a pinch of that precious condiment was given each of the boys, they smacked their lips, for never had salt tasted so good before.

Old Renus then climbed up to a higher point of the ledge back of them, for a purpose only he understood. He knew the ways and methods of trappers: that they always sought out and located upon some good-sized wilderness stream where mink, martin, fisher, lynx, otter, beaver and the less valuable muskrat had their habitation. That when so located in early autumn, a line of deadfalls would be next constructed at suitable spots alongside the stream, with steel traps set in soft swampy places to catch the cunning beaver. Also that this line of traps, often two and three miles

long, would be visited at least three times a week unless a blizzard prevented. He knew also that this unfortunate trapper had met death somehow, probably when going the rounds of his traps, and that they could easily be found by following the blazed trail all trappers make to guide them.

And just now he wanted a few steel traps very much.

He next surveyed this brook valley from his vantage point on the ledge and saw that it was narrow for a mile or more, and so would be easy to follow, and that beyond, it broadened out into a wide swamp of which it was the outlet.

"We'll git an early start 'n' come here tomorrow," he announced, now returning to the cabin and watching the boys. "'N' we'll take back a few steel traps likewise. I cal'late I know whar to find 'em now. 'N' if we don't hev some fun with them pesky cats up in our neck o' woods, it's 'cause I don't know how to set a trap!"

The two blankets were next brought out of the cabin. All the cooking utensils and tin dishes were piled onto one and a pack made. To Orlo was intrusted the precious jar of salt, while the various other cans, dishes, etc., were made into another pack for Jim and Levi, and the start for home was made.

It was almost dark ere they reached the shelter,

and they saw two of those pesky cats slink away and scamper along below the ledge.

But that did not disturb the boys now, and while Orlo wielded the ax they had secured—and were thankful for—Jim scrubbed the frying pan and coffee pot with sand, and Old Renus cut slices of venison to fry. That evening, squatting around their little sapling table on stones, they ate the most civilized and homelike meal in a month, for the fried rice cakes with deer fat were almost as good as bread and butter, the meat had salt on it, and the coffee with condensed cream tasted like nectar.

"We're goin' to live to eat from now on," Old Renus announced, smilingly. "I'm cal'latin' to hev fried b'ar ham 'n' b'ar pork, 'n' both beat any pig meat by a mile. We've got two cans o' powder 'n' a slate oven 'n' that means rice biscuit fer supper now 'n' then. O' course we got to pound rice into flour but that's easy."

But the evening was a meditative one in spite of the satisfying supper and cheery campfire, for the boys kept wondering how that lone and lonely trapper met his fate, while Old Renus listened for the howl of a wolf.

Somehow the day's discoveries and that trapper's probable fate, added to the human halloo-oo of a loon down in the big lake, and the weird

"hoo hoo-hoo" of a screech owl up in the forest, wrought an uncanny spell upon the boys' feelings. It seemed that spooks might appear from out the dark wilderness. Recalling what Old Renus had told them of that lone cabin, Orlo felt that not for worlds would he creep up the shadowy path to that long deserted hut with its one staring window hole and the bleaching bones back of it! An invisible presence also seemed to be lurking close by in the surrounding darkness. He could almost hear faint footsteps along the shadow of the ledge. A creaking came from its green overgrowth. A low click from the pebbles beside the lake shore!

Then as if to accentuate this ghostly presence—this invisible something—up from the ledge came the long snarling yaoul of a lynx!

Then all the boys felt that the only safe place was inside their cabin with the door shut.

But Old Renus only smiled down at the wistful, watching faces close by.

"Don't be skeered, boys," he said soothingly, "thar ain't a mite o' danger. 'N' I'm goin' to gin that yowlin' varmint suthin' real to yowl about afore he's many days older. You jest wait 'n' watch me!"

CHAPTER VIII

ORLO had fearsome dreams that night and grinning skulls leering out of shadows dominated them. He saw whitened bones all about, with gleaming yellow eyes glaring down at him and was finally wakened by the now familiar yowl of a wildcat. But the closed door and one small window of their cabin seemed reassuring, and he fell asleep again very soon.

Old Renus wakened all the boys at first light of dawn, and emerging from the cabin, Orlo noticed a peculiar feeling in the air and that all sounds were unusually distinct. A woodpecker's "rat tat" was like a hammer striking stone, and a red squirrel's "chirr chut chut" almost echoed across the pond.

"Thar's a storm brewin'" the old trapper asserted, noting these familiar signs. "Two o' you boys best skip over to the lake bottom 'n' tend the snares, while one helps me git breakfast. We

want to make an early start over to that old cabin. It'll rain tomorrow."

Orlo and Jim decided to visit the snares, and after a hasty "ashes" wash on the pond shore, picked up their clubs and started. Somehow the neck of woods they crossed to reach the open lake bottom, seemed more ominous than usual that morning; the mood of that lone deserted cabin with its tragic suggestions still dominating them.

A good string of birds, ten in fact, rewarded them. Short bits of fence torn away and many feathers showed where a pilfering animal had made a meal. They did not wait to repair the gaps in the fence, but scampered back, to arrive just as breakfast was ready. A crimson sunrise was adding its own storm warning, and after making the cabin snug and secure they all hurried off. They halted neither to observe deer nor ducks on the way, but followed the lake shore on a dog trot until the black stream was reached.

The deserted cabin also seemed more ominous to the boys, when they saw it, and almost like a tomb. Not one of them spoke as they drew near, nor did they peer in while Old Renus mounted the ledge to look about and make sure of his direction. He, too, seemed a little subdued by time, place and their coming quest, and with a "Come

on, boys, we hain't no time to waste," led them down into the dark, dismal swamp. The expected, blazed trail was soon spotted by him—gashes on trunks and lopped-off limbs—and with the brook's murmur in hearing, they pushed on. In a dead-fall at the mouth of a narrow, dark ravine the first trap was found, and this one merits description. It consisted of two rows of stakes driven into the earth close together; a ten or twelve foot log as many inches in diameter, to be held up by a figure-four trap of stout saplings, was placed so as to fall lengthways onto this double row of stakes, and upon the animal that entered to secure the bait—usually half a muskrat carcass or a fish—secured to the end of a spindle projecting under the log. When this was set and baited, a few green boughs were thrown over it to conceal its deadly purpose.

The log of this trap was down, the vicious teeth and skull of a wildcat lay beneath that, showing that a year or more must have elapsed since that prowler met his fate. But this was of scant interest to Old Renus, who merely noticed that grass and low bushes had grown up around the stake pen. He then turned down to the mouth of this dingle beside the brook. Here, as he expected, he found a steel trap—one of the small ten-inch size used for mink or muskrat—and in it one of the

latter's forepaws, and the trap lay beside a tiny rill and a stake to which its chain was fast. He glanced around for another one, then hung this trap to the limb of a blazed tree and pushed on. The trail was easy to follow in spite of the dark overgrown brook vale, for human footprints were plenty in all soft places with the stream close by. Three more traps were found within fifty rods, always at the mouth of some rill or dingle, and beside the main stream, and each was of the small size. Two held the bones of some animal paws, and one lay open where it was set between two sedge bogs. But those were not the traps Old Renus most wanted. He needed the heavy, double-spring kind used for lynx or bear. He led on hurriedly, the boys keeping close, for now being far into that dark swamp, where only occasional glimpses of sky were visible, and with the ghostly feeling still upon them, to lose sight of him would be horrible.

Two more deadfalls were found, the logs down and half-hidden by newly grown ferns and scrub, and then Old Renus halted to glance up into a ledge opening, a few rods to the left.

"Jest the spot fer a lynx trap," he muttered, then pushed up to it, followed close by the scared boys.

For it was a spooky spot!

An overhanging ledge on one side, a tangle of moss-coated boulders on the other, with a dense canopy over all—the boys felt sure some fierce lynx might appear at any moment! But Old Renus guessed right, for in front of this overhanging ledge stood the usual stake pen for such traps, and midway its little doors and closed, lay the big double-spring trap he wanted.

And in it a few bones and feathers of a crow!

These were the first reassuring features so far to the boys, since they entered this dark, silent, uncanny swamp.

But Old Renus never thought of their surroundings, being intent only on his search for traps. He ducked under interlaced branches, rushed through tangled thickets, crawled over fallen and moss-coated logs, always keeping an eye open for the blazed trail and human footprints. He found a second big trap and four more small ones. The latter he hung on tree limbs to be taken on their return, but he and Orlo carried the two big ones. The boys were now not only growing quite weary, but more and more scared. While Old Renus had scarcely thought of the missing trapper whose trail he was following so eagerly, the boys had thought of nothing else from the moment they entered this uncanny swamp. Each extra dark thicket they crept through might shadow his

bleaching bones! From beneath a moss-coated overhang of rock his skull might be grinning! All the stories they had ever read of such gruesome finds kept recurring. They recalled pictures of pirates hung in chains. Of a mound of skulls some explorers had found in Africa. To cap the climax of their ghostly fears, they recalled the bleaching bones and grinning skull of an insane man named Crazy Gad, they had once found in the cellar of an old disused house!

"Hain't we gone most far enough?" Orlo finally asked timidly. "It's most noon, ain't it?"

"Wal, I guess so," Old Renus admitted, glancing up at a rift of overcast sky. "But I want to find one more big trap 'n' then we'll eat a bite 'n' turn back. I s'pose ye must be gittin' tired."

Just now the trail they were following turned away from the brook and up to harder soil. A bit of open was next crossed, and beyond it lay another gap in the ledge alongside of the brook valley. Towards this Old Renus hurried, leaving the boys a little behind. They pushed on to keep up however, and had just entered the thick, dark, spruce woods again, when Orlo chanced to glance down, then leaped back with an affrighted, "Oh, Renus, Renus, Lordy, come here!"

He had almost trodden upon a grinning human skull!

A rod away, half buried under scratched up spruce needles and mould were the whitened bones of a skeleton!

Further away in shadow and around the foot of two spruce trunks close together, lay two huge wolf skulls, from one of which protruded the handle of a small camp ax. Still another wolf skull leered out from a thicket of ferns where lay more whitened bones! Taking all in all, it was the most gruesome and uncanny sight those scared boys had ever seen.

To add tragic interest, a trapper's winter coat of fur-lined deerskin, torn into pieces, was next found. A single boot gnawed and torn by sharp teeth lay near. The toe of another pointed up from a pile of mould. Scattered shreds of red flannel lay all about, and beside the tree trunks were a pair of snowshoes.

"Here's all that's left o' our trapper," Old Renus declared mournfully, and with a head-shake after his horrified look around. "'Twas wolves that et him up," he added, stooping to pick up the camp ax embedded in the skull of one. "Jerusalem, but he must a struck hard to so sunk it in a skull!"

"Here's his knife," Orlo exclaimed, spying the horn handle of a hunter's sheath knife protruding from a mound of pawed-up earth. Then Old

Renus held these two red rusted, mute tokens of a life or death fight up to the light, and glanced down at the white fanged skulls again.

A grim sense of their own danger from the same savage brutes came over him. But not a hint of it appeared in his glum, wrinkled face.

"The poor cuss fit hard fer his life," he continued. "My notion is he fust heard 'em comin' near here 'n' yanked off his snowshoes, cal'latin' to climb one o' these big spruces, but mebbe didn't hev time 'fore they war onto him. Or mebbe he knew that meant freezin' anyway. Then he must a yanked out his knife 'n' ax 'n' fit ez I wouldn't want to. Struck right 'n' left at 'em till he sunk his ax into the skull 'o one 'n' then, 'twas all over in a minute.

"O' course the rest war onto him in no time 'n' tore him into shreds. Then eat up those he'd killed. That's the way they do. 'N' they gnawed every bone clean, 'n' even chawed up the poor devil's boots to git at his feet.

"But whar's his rifle?" he added, as that inevitable possession of a trapper recurred to Old Renus. "He'd sure have one with him." Then all began a hasty search for that, to them a more than precious prize just now.

But nowhere among the whitened, fern-hidden bones, or under the mounds of pawed-up spruce

needles, was any rifle found. They looked back of the two trees, out into the tangle of scrub growth and broken ledge, peered into the thickets and back to the bones again.

But the dead trapper's rifle, his most needed friend and companion, was missing!

"I can't 'count for 't," Old Renus added, quite nonplussed now, "'less somebody come along 'n' took it. 'N' I hain't seen but one man's track all through this swamp."

For another long moment he stared down at those ghastly bones as if dazed, while the boys' hearts began to thump again at a new sense of danger, and then looking furtively around and keeping close to their protector, they followed him up to the gap in the ledge.

There, leaning against a rock lay the rifle!

And as if to mock at human tragedies and scoff at time, a creeping vine, now scarlet leaved, had wound itself around stock and barrel. Beside the rifle lay another coveted big trap and a pair of mouldy buckskin mittens, half hidden under sifted spruce needles. Just beyond, also, in front of a cobblestone pen, was a second double-spring trap.

To Old Renus the tragic tale was now all told. This lone trapper had come here in midwinter or early spring on snowshoes. A pack of wolves

had trailed him like grim, silent avengers. He, hearing them not, had laid down his rifle and taken off his mittens to set a trap, then, seeing or hearing the white-fanged brutes, had run to the double trees to climb one. He had yanked off his snowshoes to do so, but was too late. In final desperation he had, with ax and knife, fought his last battle for life.

"We'll bury the poor devil's bones," Old Renus said, after recounting this probable outcome. "Ez we're takin' most o' his belonging's, that's the least we kin do." With sharpened sticks, a shallow hole was soon dug at the foot of the two spruces, and the unknown trapper's bones hidden from human sight.

Never before in those boys' lives had a funeral seemed quite so tragic.

To get away from that uncanny spot and out of that somber, spookish swamp was now all they thought of. And well Old Renus knew it. But not until mid-afternoon, when the vacant cabin was reached. did they think of food or wish to eat.

By this time a black pall had hidden the sun, and rain seemed close at hand. "I'll jest take a look 'round in the cabin," Old Renus said after the hasty lunch, "'n' see if I kin find some shells fer the rifle. It's purty rusty, o' course, but I

guess I kin clean it up. If I kin find some shells, I'll feel lots better." How much better, or rather, safer, he did not dare tell the boys.

He searched the dark cabin once more quite hurriedly and found many things almost priceless to them all just now. A box under the bunk contained some camp candles, a cake of soap, a clean towel and a tin box of matches; another had needles, two spools of coarse thread and some buttons in it. Two squares of tobacco were also in this medley and all were needful to the castaways. Three pairs of woolen socks and two red flannel shirts were also found hidden under one end of the bunk bed, and beneath it a small bundle of tipe all rigged for ice fishing, and, almost as valuable in the eyes of Old Renus, a quart bottle of kerosene.

But, search high or low, not a solitary shell for the rifle could he find.

"Must 'a' hid 'em in the rocks some'ers," he said to the boys, who had been peeping into the malodorous cabin, and watching him. "Looks like rain 'fore long," he added, coming out and glancing skyward. Then Orlo, who had seen a prospect of a better way of fishing when he espied the bunch of lines wound on tipe, asked why the canoe couldn't be taken along to be re-covered at once.

"We can tow it 'long shore," he said, "with

one of us to push it out with a pole can't we? And stop to empty the water out now and then."

"O' course, 'n' we'll do it, 'nother day," assented Old Renus. "I'd thought o' that myself. 'N' 'twould gin you boys a few days fer trollin' on the big lake 'for snow comes. But we'd better hurry home now, 'fore it rains." Then, stringing the traps on a pole for two to carry, and dividing the other things, the start was made, and the boys were more than glad to get back on the open lake shore, for from that hour that dark, dismal swamp and lone, deserted cabin had become uncanny and spook infested.

To Orlo, as he trudged along carrying a bundle made of the two snowshoes, the shirts, camp candles and fishing lines once belonging to the dead trapper, a realization of the pathetic side of this episode now came. They were, under the circumstances, quite justified in thus appropriating his possessions, he felt, and yet it seemed pitiful. He began to see the life of that solitary trapper as it had been, coming here alone with the simplest outfit possible to sustain life. Building himself a snug cabin, going into that dismal swamp to blaze his way and set traps where no human beings ever came, and where fierce lynx, wildcats and wolves abounded. To cook and eat his simple meals all alone, from autumn until

spring, with only the yowling of night prowlers and weird calls of loons for company; and then to have it all end as it had by a horrible, tragic fate.

He could also see that unkempt, lonely man with his back against the two spruce trees, knife and ax in hand, striking at those big, white-fanged wolves, who finally devoured him. Once Orlo had fancied the life of a trapper must be the most romantic and alluring one possible. That to live in a far-away, wilderness, log cabin, and fish, hunt and trap for a living, would be idyllic beyond compare. But that charming illusion was fast leaving him now, and he began to wonder how any sane man could undertake it. Fear of starvation, of wild animals, of the dread winter, had dominated him from the first moment he set foot in this unknown, pathless wilderness, and was still with him.

In lesser degree, a little of the romance had come with the hut-building, bird-snaring and deer-killing episodes, but fear had been the most prominent. And now that fear meant—wolves!

He had heard the two distant howls from them as Old Renus had. He had questioned him, only to receive merely a nonchalant answer, but now, in the light of this gruesome happening, it occur-

red to him that Old Renus had a purpose in thus evading the matter.

"Will wolves be apt to come round our cabin after snow comes?" Orlo asked, catching up to him on the shore.

"Wal, mebbe, they might," Old Renus answered, smiling down at him. "They git purty bold then. But we'll head 'em off, so don't worry," he added, lightly. "Now we got two axes to work with, I'm going to build a high barricade 'round our hut jest to keep you boys feelin' safer. Likewise, if a wolf should call on us, he'd most likely sheer off. They're skeery o' jumpin' over fences, fearin' it may mean a trap." And so Orlo was temporarily assured.

It was almost dark when they reached the cabin and rain was pattering in the pond. But their fire was soon rekindled and blazing. Four partridges, two in the frying pan and two on a wire broiler, were set cooking. The coffeepot began simmering, and in a few minutes a good meal was ready. It was, owing to the rain, now eaten in the cabin, and by the light of a camp candle. A fire was next started in their crude fireplace, and the situation made cheery. Old Renus filled a full pipe this time, and puffed away in satisfied content.

"We might be wuss off, a lot wuss," he said

later as they all reclined in front of the glowing fire. But the boys thought only of that lone, deserted cabin, the dismal swamp and the grinning skulls!

CHAPTER IX

FINDING the lone trapper's cabin and his bones did not disturb Old Renus to any extent. He was well used to such wilderness episodes. In fact two similar ones had come under his personal observation many years before, one of a trapper who had both hands caught in a lynx trap he was setting, and thus helpless, had set out for a lumber camp twenty miles distant and died on the way. Another of a hunter lost in the woods one fall and found by Old Renus and another lumberman the next spring—or, rather, all that the wildcats had left of him. Many other tragic happenings of the same import had been heard of by this old woodsman, so he had come to expect them as part of wildwood life. He was thankful that so many needful articles of camp life—and a few luxuries, like candles and tobacco—had come to them, and more than thankful for the two axes. He was considerably alarmed over the evident danger from wolves later on, and now

felt almost positive that, soon after snow came, some roving band of them would discover their camp. He knew how keen of scent they were, being able to detect the smell of cooking meat many miles away, or follow a human trail long after it was buried under foot-deep snow. He knew their habits also, and that once they found a hunter's or lumbering camp, they would lurk around it for weeks or until starvation drove them away, and so for these reasons he felt worried.

He had at first planned a stake fence around the cabin. Now, lounging in front of their fire that first rainy evening, broader plans occurred to him. First, for safety sake, he thought it wise to cut and build a barricade of birch saplings fully ten feet high all about it. The boys had already cut almost a cord of these. Double that would be needed—and there were groves of them close by. He also saw how two narrow sheds could be made by laying poles and covering them with boughs over the side spaces between the fence and the cabin. He also planned to set up a large slate stone under one shed, a double-decked one, to enclose and bake rice cakes in. They were easy to make now with flour of pounded rice, baking powder and deer fat. He meant also to get a bear, now that he had secured the big traps. He had noticed

and located a good spot to trap one, up in the blowdown. A cave was there, under a shelf of rock over which a tree had fallen and spruce scrub had since grown. He had seen bear tracks near this place, and had noticed that tufts of grass and wintergreen leaves had been carried into this den, proof to him that some cunning bear had selected it for his winter sleep.

He knew how to set and bait a bear trap. First, to rub it well with scorched deer fat, to get some aromatic roots and brown them over fire to tuck under the trap. Wild honey was the best bait, molasses nearly as good, but he had neither now. He had noticed a beech tree, however, and knew that a handful of those nuts properly roasted was prime bait for a bear.

He meant also to trap a few lynx and bobcats now that he had the right traps, and for them fish was the one best bait. He needed their skins for bedclothes in the coming zero weather. Altogether, he foresaw that they had much to do to get those ready for winter.

"I guess two on ye best go tend the snares," he directed, the next morning while cooking. "'N' not mind the rain. We can't 'ford to in fact. 'N' we'll need more birds 'n we're likely to git, also. Arter it clears off, we'll all go over to the lake bottom 'n' set up more fences on the east side. But

fer steady work it's cuttin' birch saplin's now fer a spell."

Orlo and Jim scampered over to the lake bottom, paying no heed to the driving rain—for they were getting hardened to wildwood life now—and found ten birds had been caught in the eighteen snares set there, and that two more had been eaten by a fox. They saw the fox, too, sneaking away with a part of one bird, and noted that he was of the blue species.

"Jings, but I'd like to catch a few of them!" exclaimed Orlo. "They're worth fifty dollars apiece, I've heard."

"Let's ask Old Renus to let us," rejoined Jim, who, like Orlo, was always short of pocket money. And to both it seemed that this was a rare chance to garner many dollars. They had, of course, up to this time, realized that to build a secure shelter and lay in an ample supply of food for winter must be their sole thought. But with a dozen long strips of smoked venison now hanging from each pole rafter of their cabin, with full four dozen birds drawn and stuffed with scorched wintergreen leaves, packed in the lean-to, and the wicker basket full of wild rice, they felt no need to worry about food. Besides, snaring birds only meant picking them up along the fence, so to speak, and with ten small steel traps in hand, the

boys felt it to be almost a crime not to set them for such valuable pelts. But they were loyal to their hero and protector, and after resetting the snares, they hurried back to help him cut the small white birches into eight-foot sticks and carry them to the cabin.

By mid-afternoon the rain had ceased, and the old man, after rigging poles for two of the boys to fish with in the pond, took Orlo, and with two big traps, hurried away to set them for lynx or bobcats. One was set beside a tall rock near the lower end of the blowdown, in the usual manner, at the entrance to a small pen of driven stakes, with a trout impaled on a stick for bait. A few spruce boughs were next thrown over this pen to hide human handiwork. The second trap was placed at the entrance to a narrow gap in the ledge opposite, and then, after gathering a handful of beechnuts and pulling up a few wild parsnips to roast and bait the bear trap with later, Old Renus and Orlo returned to the pond to see what Jim and Levi were doing.

And those boys were having the time of their lives pulling one- to two-pound trout out as fast as they could bait their hooks!

Their rods were no better than those used to catch pouts with at home, being green alder poles with the tipe lines from the deserted cabin. For

bait they had caught a few minnows in the brook above. The sun was now out and shining just below the trees, leaving them in shadow, and it seemed as if that four-acre pond was fairly alive with trout. No matter whether a live minnow was cast to them or a bit of dead one, the moment it struck the water, two or three greedy trout leaped for it. The boys already had more than they could all eat at a dozen meals now tossed into a rock depression. They had used up all their minnows, and had then cut a small trout up for bait, which appeared to be just as good, and a trout was yanked out as fast as a hook could be baited.

"Better let up," Old Renus advised, after watching the excited boys a few moments. "We can't eat half ye got now. 'N' 'fore ye go fishin' ag'in, we'll go 'n' dam up a deep hole in the brook 'bove here to keep 'em alive. Trout'll come mighty handy to us when the ice is two feet thick on the pond 'n' snow 'bout six. No use in wastin' good trout if they are plenty."

That supper of trout, properly salted and fried in deer fat, with hot coffee and rice cakes, eaten just as twilight came, was one of the best so far enjoyed. There were a few features that made it so. First, they could and did eat with clean hands and from tin plates, which was much more enjoyable than eating from the clay ones now soaked

with grease. The coffeepot and tin cups were bright from sand scrubbing. They could sit at a low table over which a piece of the balloon was spread, and all these semi-civilized aids counted. Once those boys had imagined that a wildwood life, with fish and game aplenty to live upon, would be the acme of joy, but they had had no definite idea of how such food would be cooked or eaten. Home appliances for proper cooking with other additions to meals had not been a part of their charming illusion, but all that had appealed to them was its romance.

Now they had been plunged into a real wilderness, with fish and game more plentiful than they ever dreamed possible, and they had captured or caught more than they could eat, with little effort. But for three weeks these fish and game meals had served only to keep them from starving, and had been eaten about as monkeys would have eaten them; and so untidy, so savage-like had this eating with fingers become, that tin plates and iron knives and forks seemed luxuries, and a tin cup of coffee tasted like ambrosia.

To Old Renus it was all a matter of course and to be expected in the woods. His home life in his old rookery never had been much better; a clean deal table without a cover, tin dishes and no napkins, had about measured it.

But the boys had not complained, and by this time fully realized that the wise woodcraft of the old hunter was all that had saved them from starvation. With a thick-walled cabin to sleep warm and dry in when it rained, an open fire and a candle to light it, with fish and game in plenty, besides a chance to set a few traps, the romance and charm of wildwood life seemed to return once more. Even the lurking fear of wolves in Orlo's mind began to fade away, and as he lay stretched in front of their open fire that evening, watching Old Renus cleaning the rusty rifle with his knife, a rag and bottle of kerosene, meanwhile puffing his cob pipe with unction, he began to count his blessings, as the old man had so often advised him to do. Luck had been with them from the very start, as evidenced by finding the lone trapper's cabin, and the plentitude of fish and game.

But the fine old hero with his wise forethought was best of all.

A minor bit of luck came a little later when Old Renus, in breaking the rifle apart, found that its magazine held six shells. He removed them carefully with the lever, and kept on cleaning the rusted parts, until, with more oil applied, the valuable weapon was in working order again.

"Now, you can shoot a bear or lynx, can't you, Uncle Renus?" asked Jim.

"Wal, I kin sartin," he answered, returning the shells and closing the rifle. "But jes now I guess I won't. We may need them shots more'n we do now, later on. When we git our woodpile built around our cabin, we'll go fetch that canoe ez you boys want, 'n' then we'll cover it 'n' you kin hev a few days' fun with it on the big lake. I'm cal'latin' to try 'n' find that trapper's shells when we go thar ag'in. I fiigger he must a hid 'em outside. But we won't shoot any o' these jest yit, boys."

Then Orlo thought of wolves once more.

The next morning the boys were up at dawn with Old Renus and all were astonished to find a flock of ducks that half covered their pond, had lit in during the night, and were now swimming about and diving in care-free manner. They rose, however, with much quacking and splashing as the four appeared from the cabin and swung away in harrow shape to light on the big lake beyond.

"They come to git a feed of wild rice," Old Renus then announced, chuckling, "but we got ahead on 'em.

"It's curi's," he added, "how that thing works out with wild ducks. A few out o' that flock, mebbe a pair or two, I cal'late, came here a year ago 'n' filled up on the rice, then went on South. Now, a year arter, those old ones had a flock here ag'in. 'N' thar ye be."

"But how did the old ones tell the rest?" Jim asked eagerly.

"Wal, they did, that's plain 'nuff," came the positive answer. "'N' so do all animals talk to one 'nother. I've seen it proved out many a time. 'N' that's what makes 'em grow wild soon 'ez we git after 'em with guns 'n' traps. They ain't so here ye notice."

But trap-setting—the one chief allurement of most farm boys—now appealed to them with increasing force. So much so that the next morning Orlo begged the old man to go and set their ten small traps for mink and fox.

"We'll do it," he answered them smilingly, "jest ez soon ez we git our woodpile wall built up. Then I cal'late we'll all sleep better. No tellin' what night prowler 'll come snoopin' 'round our place."

A little sport came after breakfast, when Old Renus led the boys to take a look at the two traps set for the marauding cats that had so annoyed them. Following close behind him, Jim and Levi almost quivered, for neither had ever set eyes upon one of these fierce animals, and the lynx that Orlo saw had made him tremble. But as they drew near to the first trap and peered through the bushes they saw a striped cat-shaped creature nearly three feet long with pointed ears and vici-

ous yellow eyes, leap upward with a snarl of anger.

"Bobcat, by Jove!" Old Renus shouted gleefully, "I'll larn ye to steal our birds, blast ye!" And the blows he next dealt this snarling beast proved how he felt. Another cat equally as fierce was found safe in the second trap, and dispatched speedily, and both traps having been set and baited again, the boys returned to camp.

"Two on ye kin go at snare-settin' now 'n' one work with me a day, then swap 'round 'n' so on in turn," Old Renus then directed, knowing how the boys felt. "We've got stuff enough cut fer our job, 'n' I want ye boys to hev all the fun ye kin while fun's goin'." He and Orlo, who chose to stay with him, then set about the barricade building, while Jim and Levi betook themselves to the lake bottom to construct more snare fences. Then Orlo, who had, ever since they found the old trapper's bones, been growing more positive that Old Renus was worried about wolves, determined to find out.

"Do you think we are in much danger from wolves, Uncle Renus?" he asked, as they began work. "You act so, and I don't think you want us to know it."

"Wal, sorter 'n' sorter not," the old man answered, vaguely. "Wolves are 'round here I

know. They ain't like to bother us much till they begin to band together arter snow comes 'n' they find less to eat. Then they'll grow bolder. They're the most savage critters in these woods, anyways, but even they are a leetle skeered o' humans 'less they're in packs. 'N' then ye got to watch out. But you needn't worry, Orlo. I know the critters 'n' we'll head 'em off."

"But can't they jump over any wall we can build?"

"Not apt to, if it's high enough, say ten feet or more. 'N' then they're sorter cowards in a way, 'n' a wall like ours is to be 'll 'pear like a trap to 'em. To a single one anyway."

"But if a pack comes 'round they will stay and watch us, how long?" Orlo persisted anxiously.

"Wal, thar's no tellin'. I've known a pack to hang 'round a lumber camp till every one war shot, fourteen on 'em 'n' it took over a week. They run in packs o' 'bout six or eight usually. They come 'n' go ez onsartin ez the wind. Hang 'round two or three days, then off ag'in. 'N' liable to show up ag'in in a day or two, 'thout even a yep. Just appear like so many spooks. When they're on track o' a deer or moose, they'll run like a hound but never bark once all day.

"We'll be safe enough in our cabin inside o' the wall, even if a pack on 'em does come 'round,"

he added, assuringly. "Only we wouldn't dare go further away 'n' down to the pond. We may be shut up soon arter snow comes, but that's the most we need worry 'bout."

But Orlo was not entirely assured. He had begun to get used to the plentitude of lynx and wildcat about, and to their frequent yowling; he was also confident that the assurances of Old Renus were to be relied upon, and that they were in no danger at present. But this wall building seemed ominous, and the prospect of being kept prisoners for weeks in their stone hut by a pack of dreaded wolves was not pleasant to anticipate.

But Jim and Levi returned at midday with a good string of birds, also with the announcement that they had seen two more foxes, one blue and one of the common yellow species, and also they had seen a mink just emerging from the pond with a trout in its mouth, and so trap-setting for such valuable furs now banished wolves from Orlo's mind for the present.

CHAPTER X

OLD RENUS was not only wise in woodcraft and woodlife, but during his many years' wanderings before he settled down in Oakham "to live sorter civilized," as he put it, in an old abandoned house, he had traveled far and seen much. He had, as a young man, been a cowboy on a far Western ranch, later on a mine prospector in Nevada, a helper at a Columbia River salmon cannery, a lumberman in Oregon and Michigan, a cook in a Maine lumber camp, a fisherman on Lake Superior and a worker in one of the copper mines of that country for a brief time. He had shot buffalo when the plains teemed with them, also grizzlies, elk, mountain lions, panther, and all kinds of bears except the Arctic white ones. But mainly he had been a trapper around the lower Hudson Bay or along its scores of tributary lakes and streams. He had led this wandering life mainly for sight-seeing.

He had gathered a few hundred dollars to se-

cure himself in his old age and this money was now safe in Oakham's one savings bank, but freedom from all civilized restraint was as the breath of life for him, and he would not have lived in an ordinary furnished home and worn civilized raiment if he could. For this reason his habits of life and living since he settled down in Oakham stamped him as a nondescript at least, and one who might rob poultry roosts if game failed him. How far he had wandered he had never mentioned to any one in Oakham, and not until these three boys had become boon companions of his, and he had told them stories around his open fire on chilly evenings, did anyone in that quiet town learn what a wide wanderer he had been.

Despite his semi-vagabond and hermit-like way of existence, Old Renus was not what he seemed to be, for in reality he was a true nature-worshiper, an admirer of all that was grand and beautiful, and a keen judge of human nature; an intense lover of children, he was pure-souled and generous-hearted. He hated shams, hypocrisy and all sanctimonious people who believed themselves the anointed of the Lord. These, however, did not concern him overmuch. What he did care for, and live for, was the company and affection of these three boys he had in a way attached to himself, Orlo being his favorite.

This was Old Renus, a unique old nondescript with a background of forest, field and stream, to whom the song of birds was sweetest music, and the billowing of green meadows and laughter of brooks as so many poems.

He knew how all Oakham would feel towards him for this escapade—for which he was entirely blameless—and he had already resolved that unless he could take these boys back, well and hearty, he would never set foot in the town again.

He had had a few hard problems to solve in his life, but never any to compare with this one that had been thus thrust upon him, the problem of taking care of these boys through six months of Canadian winter in this wilderness well up towards Hudson Bay, as he now feared they must be.

Luck so far had favored him, luck that seemed almost a miracle, especially finding the dead trapper's cabin. But he was not much of a believer in luck, and he knew that no luck could possibly checkmate the rigors of winter where they were, or guard them against the ferocious lynx and wolves.

So that was why every thought so far and every hour of daylight had been devoted to the solution of this problem. He had had his eyes open also to needs beyond food and shelter, and

had already gathered a few simple roots and herbs of medicinal nature that only an experienced woodsman like himself knew the value of. But food, warmth and protection from wolves were most needed now. He already had deer meat enough, smoked and hanging in the cabin, to last until spring. He meant to kill two more deer just before snow came, hang them outside to freeze, and then bury these under slabs of slate to protect them from prowling cats. He knew the boys would bring in plenty of birds before that time, and so, now building his barricade, he felt "preparedness" was well under way.

With Orlo helping, he built his bulwark open, that is, two rows of sticks laid on short cross pieces with spaces between to fill with spruce boughs, to keep out the wind and driving snow as well as wolves. He would also save all the refuse for fuel. He had his barricade, over eight feet high, almost built up ere nightfall drew near again, when Jim and Levi returned, bringing more birds.

"We might lay poles over the two spaces on either side of the cabin, and by putting boughs on them, have two sheds to keep wood under," Jim suggested.

"Wal, I'm call'atin' to," smiled Old Renus. "That is, one fer wood, 'n' tother to shut up by

some extra big sticks, to hang birds in. 'N' a couple 'o deer to let freeze. I ain't cal'latin' on goin' hungry this winter. Tomorrow it'll be dry 'nuff to set a b'ar trap—I know whar—'n' in a couple o'days more two on us workin' here 'll hev the snuggest kind o' camp."

"Mebbe Orlo 'n' I better go 'n' fetch that old canoe here fust," he added, after a moment's thought. "I want to find whar that trapper hid his shells. We could use a few now quite handy 'n' save me a lot o' fuss in gettin' the two deer I want. Frozen venison is better 'n smoked.

"Thar's a lot to do yet," he continued, cleaning some trout to fry while the boys started the fire. "But many hands make light work. Once we git things snug here, we kin all go fishin' or trappin'. I'd like ye boys to hev a good string o' furs to take out in the spring, say 'bout five hundred wuth apiece, o' blue fox 'n' mink. 'Twould come handy when fair time comes. I don't cal'late you'll want to try a balloon ag'in, howsomever." And then Old Renus smiled at his well-beloved charges.

"I guess we all better help you here and get things fixed up," Jim next suggested. "We built four more snare fences today. We've got seven over there now. Two of us can go tend 'em morning and night, and that will do."

"I'm willin'," smiled Old Renus, well pleased

at this plan. " 'N' tomorrow Orlo 'n' I'll go fetch the canoe while ye two kin cut 'n' bring more birch arter tendin' the snares."

That evening was made more homelike and consoling to all by reason of that enclosure, for, reclining about their outside fire, it seemed as if they were now safe from all night prowlers or chilly winds in the future. A little redoubt to make their stone hut doubly safe.

"We kin live here snug ez a bug in a rug this winter," the old man said, voicing this while he smoked in serene content. "We kin roof over all the spaces 'cept in front o' the cabin with poles 'n' spruce boughs. When it snows we kin shovel it out. Now we got axes, I kin make shovels. We kin cook out here under cover 'n' out o' the wind with wood all dry. Fact I think we best cut 'n' split a lot 'n' pile it inside to be handy. We've got two skins already towards keepin' warm. We'll hev plenty more 'fore long; 'n' we sartinly hev meat to burn. Quite a little better off 'n we war four weeks ago when we crawled out o' that basket most froze 'n' nothin' but half-cooked brook suckers to eat, ain't we, boys?"

And that was Old Renus all over. Always counting his blessings and seeing the silver lining. It is no wonder the boys idolized him as a hero beyond compare.

The trip he and Orlo made the next day to the deserted cabin to fetch the canoe added a little to their meager stores. For Old Renus, wise to the ways of trappers, made a more careful search for hidden things, and found two tin pails nearly full of corn meal and flour hanging under the bunk, a tin box of hard-tack and, equally valuable, a tin baker, covered over by spruce boughs in one corner of the cabin. A bag of coarse salt he found in a niche back of the chimney, and four more tin plates under the dry boughs in the bunk. Beside these lay a deerskin pouch with a few dollars in Canadian coin. A dozen of the valuable shells were discovered in an empty tobacco pouch pushed into a chink between two of the log walls, over which a bit of bark had been tacked, and under a flat stone beside the fireplace were a handful of nails and with them a stick of solder. Outside, under the canoe, lay a rusted stewpan, and in it a blackened coffeepot. But nowhere inside or out of the hut could any more shells be found.

"He must 'a' hid 'em 'way from the cabin," Old Renus asserted, after the long search, "fer plenty o' ammunition is the one thing a trapper needs most. 'N' he don't waste it either. Ez this hut must 'a' bin built quite a few years, it shows that he nachly left everything he didn't need goin' out, 'n'

so the last time in he must a brought a lot o' shells. They 'r' outside under some shelf o' rock or small cave."

But an hour's search failed to find them.

Two empty wooden boxes were found back of the cabin under dry boughs, and tucked into the log wall was a broken-handled ax. "We kin fix that," Old Renus declared, adding it to their collection and packing all into the two boxes, "but I hate to gin up those shells."

"We'd better be startin' back, howsomever," he added, glancing at the sun, "'n' call ourselves lucky to find what we hev. These things 'll all come in handy."

A clue to where the trapper came from was also found in the name "St. Maurice, P. Q.," on a strip of box cover.

"Wal, that looks like luck, too," Old Renus ejaculated on reading it, "fer that's the name o' one o' the longest feeders o' the St. Lawrence 'n' settlement at the mouth on't. It's 'bout four hundred miles long, too, and runs north 'n' then west. I war up it once to the mouth o' Vermillion River, whar it split into four streams 'n' I cal'late we must be at the head o' one on 'em. I war 'fraid we'd fetch up on the Hudson Bay watershed 'n' that would a bin bad fer us. Taken us over two months to git home arter we got to a settlement,

'n' by steamer out o' Hudson Bay at that. If we are whar I guess, it'll take us all o' a month to reach the St. Lawrence 'bout halfway up to Montreal. I hope it 'll prove out so."

It needed two trips to carry the canoe and their findings to the lake now. That craft was found to leak but little, and much to Orlo's joy, they were enabled to paddle home by keeping close to shore.

"Mebbe we kin spread melted pitch over the bottom so to use it till the lake freezes," Old Renus declared, as they drew the canoe out on the shore nearest to camp. "But we must cover it 'fore we start out in the spring. We couldn't run three hundred miles o' river ez it is with lots o' rapids 'n' carries." Then thrusting the long steel-shod setting-pole belonging to the canoe over the bank, Old Renus and Orlo picked up their additional outfit and hastened to camp.

It was mid-afternoon. Jim and Levi were across the pond cutting white birch. A goodly pile of it in front of the barricade proved how busy they had been, and a hallo from Orlo brought them back, carrying a bunch of the four-inch by eight-foot poles they had cut.

"We're in luck ag'in," Old Renus announced as they came up. "The canoe kin be pitched over so ye boys kin use it a spell. We found two kinds

o' flour, a tin baker, 'n' a lot o' things we need. 'N' tonight, boys, we'll hev hot corn bread 'n' broiled partridge fer supper. How'll that strike ye?"

"We found ten birds waiting for us in the fences this morning," Jim said gleefully, "and saw another blue fox."

"Wal, that's good, too," Renus answered, who, with Orlo, was now munching the smoked venison they had hastily broiled. "We've got our camp work so well on now, one o' ye kin go over to the lake bottom with me this arternoon 'n' set some fox traps. We got fish 'nuff fer bait. 'N' mebbe the other two better go at damin' a pool in the brook to fill with live trout. Once we git the traps all set we kin tend 'em night 'n' morning, 'n' work on the camp between times. We might ez we'll hev' some fun now," and how elated those boys all were at this proposal needs no explaining. Moreover, they also saw in this plan not only the one supreme sport of all to them, but unlimited pocket money, once safely home.

The October sun was shining fair and warm now, the Indian summer haze still in the air. Their camp with its protecting barricade promised all sorts of satisfaction, with a store of wood that seemed more than enough to last all winter. To construct and fill a pool with live trout had been one of their previous dreams, and all these

combined joys and prospects made them feel they were now in a veritable sportsman paradise, as indeed they were.

Old Renus, busy man that he always was, took six of their ten small traps and with Levi carrying bait and the camp ax, led the way over to set the traps along the border of the vast lake bottom. Each was placed at some spot always at the entrance to a narrow defile opening into the woods, and in the door of a little stake pen. And now, after setting the last one at the mouth of a deeper cañon, a split in a high ledge, and covering it with boughs, something familiar in the character of the broken rock caught the attention of Old Renus.

"Good Lord, it can't be!" he almost gasped, picking up a bit of gray-black stone, from which glinted flecks of mica. "Looks like it though," he added, hastening up the defile, then halting to scrape moss from a sloping ledge. He stooped again to pick up another bit, and held it up to the light. He dove forward to find a hard stone and pound this soft, black bit to coarse powder, then crumbled it in his palm and studied it again.

"Great Jumpin' Jehosophat, but 'tis, sure's a gun," he exclaimed once more. "'N' millions o' tons, too! Good Lord, what a find!" Then he glanced around, and the beetling ledges up the

defile were all of the same gray-black, glistening ore!

"What is it, Uncle Renus? What you found?" questioned Levi, who had followed and watched him curiously.

"Oh, nothin' but some curi's stun that once come out o' a volcano," Old Renus answered with the sudden consciousness that it would never do to let the truth be known to these boys—now. No, not until he could secure a legal title to this wondrous discovery. "This lake bottom war once the crater o' one, I cal'late," he continued, "'n' filled up with lava. Later on water come in 'n' mud got washed in by streams. Then the lake dried up mebbe, or some earthquake cracked the bottom 'n' let the water out. But the mud wasn't thick 'nuff to grow big trees here, only jest what ye see. 'N' it's this stun that proves to me my notion is right."

But that old woodsman, more wise, thoughtful and considerate than these boys even dreamed, was now so dazed and astonished he scarce knew where he was; only a life habit of cautious observance and forethought now saved him from an unwise admission.

"Volcanoes and earthquakes hev done queer things," he added, more composed now. "They pushed up mountains 'n' split 'em wide open.

They let in sink holes whar all our lakes are now. Fact all continents war shoved up 'bove the level by 'quakes. I noticed 'round our pond the same thing, same sort o' stun in one spot at the head on't. 'N' that pond is only a sink hole slopin' up to whar the rice grew 'n' good spawnin' beds for trout 'n' good spring water. I cal'late it comes from a big spring 'way up in our blowdown." Having thus evaded Levi's curiosity, he led the way back again out of the cañon.

Glancing around the open once more, he saw, close beside the woods border, not ten rods away, a good-sized apple tree, white with small apples!

CHAPTER XI

HOORAY, but this is luck again!" Old Renus exclaimed, hastening to this fully laden apple tree. "'N' sweet ones, too," he added gleefully, munching one while Levi did the same.

Never before had apples tasted better to that farm boy now hungry for them!

To the old hunter they seemed more than a welcome addition to their scanty list of eatables. They had meat and birds in plenty, but wild rice and a few bitter wild parsnips being the only vegetables in hand, he feared the effect six months of an almost entirely meat diet would have. "We must gather all on 'em right away," he said, filling his shirt and pockets from the ground almost white with them, while Levi did the same. "They'll hev to freeze, most on 'em, but if kept froze it won't hurt 'em much 'n' then we kin dry some. In the mornin' we'll make some bags outen our silk covers 'n' lug 'em all to camp."

The snares were looked over on their way back, and eight more birds added to their catch. It seemed like snaring chickens to catch those tame partridges, who never flew except when frightened. But this plentitude and tameness were also proof positive that they had never been hunted with guns. Probably not at all by white men. Perhaps a century or more before, Indians had snared them, but that had not inculcated the natural fear of man all game birds have.

Here was an unusual feeding and breeding spot for them. An open area many miles long and varying from one-half to two or three miles wide, with only small, scattered, scrub-grown mounds like islands in this level of wintergreen leaves. There were also berries enough to sustain millions of birds. The few dozen partridges the boys had snared seemed to make no impression on their numbers. Like flies, when one was snared, two came to the funeral.

This vast open also served as a protection from foxes and cats, their natural enemies, who could not creep upon them unawares. Hence their astonishing plentitude.

When Old Renus reached their pond, he found Orlo and Jim hilarious with the sport they were having. They had utilized their original scoop net to hold the live trout half submerged, until

a dozen or more had been pitched into it; then they carried it up and dumped the fish into their little pool above the pond.

"It's goin' to be a handy feedin' spot for mink," Old Renus asserted, looking into the pool. "Guess I better set a couple o' traps clus by." He did this, then set the other two small ones across the pond at suitable spots for the same fish-eating animals, and as it was not yet nightfall he returned to the camp and taking their last big trap and some bear bait, also an ax, hastened away up the long blowdown to set it for Bruin. This also merits description.

A bear is a very powerful animal, and one who finds his paw in a trap will inevitably bite or gnaw his leg above the trap until he can tear himself loose and escape. To obviate this a small log is attached to the trap chain instead of fastening that, so the captured bear will drag the trap slowly away into forest or swamp, rather than to gnaw himself free. His trail can then be followed easily and Bruin is usually found not far away, and shot.

Old Renus, who had trapped many bears, now set about the job with his usual caution. First, he pulled a few wild parsnip roots to rub on the soles of his boots and hands so that Bruin would not smell him. He next cut down a six-inch swamp

maple, chopped off a five-foot log just above a stout limb, which was also lopped off, leaving a few inches of prong. He then cut and sharpened a stout stick flat, like a chisel, to dig with, and thus equipped, stole onward cautiously to his bear hole. When he drew near he stepped on as many stones as possible, crawled along on fallen tree trunks when the chance offered, and finally picked up a flat stone to stand upon while setting his trap. This was well smeared with deer fat, and placed in a shallow hole, a few browned parsnip roots tucked under the bait pan, and all, including the trap chain and log toggle, covered with soft, dry moss and leaves. A handful of roasted beechnuts was next spread around the trap for a final allurement, and then Old Renus withdrew as he came, leaving no visible footprints behind him. A lot of precaution, of course, but he knew what the cunning of Bruin meant, and that no wild creature roaming in this wilderness was as hard to trap as a bear unless it was a beaver. A fox came next, while cats, muskrats, mink, fishes and otter were as easy to catch as rabbits.

And Old Renus wanted a bear just now much more than a deer!

First, because his skin would keep all three of his boys warm in any temperature. His hams, quartered, salted and smoked, were far better

than any domestic ones, while his belly was like thick pork, only far more eatable. A goodly quantity of excellent lard could be obtained, and with the unhoped for find of sweet apples, Old Renus foresaw a few possible pies for occasional luxuries.

He visited his other two traps returning to camp, and found in one a fine lynx, held by its hind leg; the lynx leaped up snarling and yowling the moment Old Renus appeared; and so vicious and dangerous was this full four-foot long animal, that Old Renus did not dare try and club it to death until he had the rifle, so he hurried on to camp for it. He called to the boys also to let them share the excitement of killing such a pernicious brute, and so fearsome did that yellow-eyed creature with body the size of a big dog seem, that they quivered with fear lest the animal should get out of the trap and spring upon them.

Old Renus knew the danger, and creeping cautiously up, club in hand, he dealt the crouching brute a stunning blow on its head. But it needed a dozen more to quite kill him. Then a united whoop of joy came from the boys, for to them a lynx was the most fearful of all animals so far seen in this wilderness.

They were destined to meet and fear worse ones, however.

But fear of all such prowlers vanished when

they once more watched Old Renus broiling partridges and frying trout for supper inside their ten-foot barricade. Its doors of two thicknesses of birch poles with spruce bark between were shut and bolted with two more stout sticks. Inside the cabin their sapling and bark table with silk cover was set with bright tinware, while over their open fire hung a pot of coffee. A keener anticipation than this secure and wildwood meal was with them, however, and that was the many traps to set and to be tended twice a day for weeks to come.

Once, as farm boys and at this season, the brown and scarlet October one, a few traps set for "mus'rats" worth a shilling apiece had been for months a continual anticipation. But now, with seven snare fences that returned a dozen or more birds each day, with six traps for foxes, four for mink, two for bobcats, and one for a glorious bear, all awaiting them on the morrow, why the joyful anticipation seemed like a beautiful dream.

Their secure and romantic hut, the building of which had consumed most of four weeks, was a habitation they were proud of; and, with its unique bulwark, one they felt perfectly safe in. Their rice hay bed, spread over spruce boughs, exhaled a true woodsy aroma. The two dozen

long pieces of smoked venison depending from the cabin roof with double the number of partridges hanging under one shed, likewise added satisfaction. The thoughts of these impecunious farm boys just now, too, were centered on the valuable furs soon to be theirs. But the best of all their possessions was Old Renus, to whom they felt they owed their lives in addition to all of these minor joys.

He, too, as they squatted around their rustic table, felt fairly well satisfied with what had been accomplished. They were moderately well protected from the many dangers that surrounded them; but he knew that after the snow came the dangers would increase; the cats would grow bolder and, scenting their cooking and meat, would haunt their cabin each night; and far more to be dreaded was the danger from wolves, always in his mind.

He was, however, in addition to being an optimist, a firm believer in the old axiom that "There are two things it doesn't pay to worry about: those you can help and those you can't." In this case he could not help the number of dangerous wild animals hereabouts, the inevitable accompaniment to the multiplicity of deer and game birds. All he could do was to provide against these dangers in the best way possible.

Later, and as he lounged in front of their cheery fire, enjoying his cob pipe, he began wondering if that gray-black ore he had found would prove to be real silver-lead ore worth hundreds of dollars per ton, or just the "rotten rock," so called, which much resembled it. He was familiar with both, or had been years before. He had visited the famous Bonanza and Ophir silver mines in his younger days. He knew that the genuine ore was so like the bogus that the test of smelting must be made to determine which was the pay ore.

But that necessitated a crucible with coal and blow pipe.

He felt almost positive that what he had found was the real silver-lead ore. He had, a few years before he came to Oakham, visited the recently discovered Cobalt silver mines, which were located in Northern Canada, perhaps less than one hundred miles away. He knew also that veins of all minerals usually followed a direct trend, often dipping miles below the earth's surface to appear again, sometimes miles away! And this ledge might be an outcropping of the rich Cobalt vein.

But how to test the ore? How smelt a bit of it, requiring, as he would, the intense heat of coal and blowpipe?

So far the problems that confronted him had

been easy for a trained woodsman to solve. Building a hut where materials were plenty, and securing game that was not wild, was easy. Luck had favored them, especially in finding the defunct trapper's cabin with all its essential and valuable outfit. But no luck could possibly find the means to smelt ore in this vast, pathless wilderness.

The boys, keenly alert to so much excitement and risk, now began to suspect that a mystery existed. Levi, always watchful of Old Renus, whom he considered the most wonderful of men, decided there was something beyond his mere curiosity or interest in this sombre cañon, and that the queer black stone he examined so keenly meant something more than the evidence of volcanic action. A momentous secret that even his mentor was unable to explain as yet. Levi wasn't in the habit of questioning him overmuch, for he held him in too much awe. But he was quite sure by the look on his face when studying that bit of black rock, that it held a secret. And a secret in this wilderness was to him like the hope of seeing a ghost, both alluring and fearsome. He sought to solve it the next day when he and Jim went to tend the snares, for that being done, both hurried on to the dark cañon. It seemed a more forbidding place as they now entered it, a more vast and shadowy one. Only a little way did they dare

go, then they halted, listened and looked around. Sounds in there became magnified at once. The tinkle of a hidden rill was like the click of bones, the chirp of a bird up above like the caw of a crow, and the slant of sunlight across the dark gorge, ghostly and spectral. An eerie, weird feeling kin to the moment they first saw the one open window in the dead trapper's cabin, came to them, and was almost as dreadful as the sight of his grinning skull. Only for a few moments could they face that awful presence now confronting them, and then, with loud-thumping hearts, and hand in hand, they retreated.

"Uncle Renus found something awful in there, I know it," Levi whispered, when sunlight and safety was reached. "He said it was some queer stone, but it was more than that."

"Maybe it was blood that had colored the stone," Jim answered, in the same awed tone, "and he didn't want to tell you. He's 'fraid we'll get scared, I guess."

"I've seen him give a start when a wolf howled, like he knew we was in danger," Levi added to this surmise of fearsome things. "He's that way with us. He looked almost scared when he found that black rock here," and then they both stared up into the dark defile as if that ill-omened stone had been the famous Arabic one of old legend,

and from that day onward that shadowy defile became a haunted one to the boys.

"Something awful happened there once and Uncle Renus found it out," Levi asserted to Orlo later on, when initiating him into this dread secret. "He won't tell us and I won't ask him."

"Better not," cautioned Orlo, who had the most faith in the wisdom of their old hero. "He knows best what to tell us and what not to. I ain't going to be 'fraid of anything till he says so."

But for all that, never afterward did they go out into the lake bottom without casting furtive glances at the somber cañon, as if a ghost might stalk out of it at any moment. They began to watch Old Renus more closely. If he looked anxiously at anything, they did the same. If he listened long after some wolf howl or lynx yowl, so did they, but with extra beating hearts. If he peered at some animal track, as he often did, they scanned his face curiously, even as they had at first sight of him years before. He had been a mystery to them then; and now they were surrounded by mystery, with him for their only guardian and protector. Nor did it seem to them they could escape it until they were safely out of this forbidding wilderness.

Despite this watchfulness and vague suspicion, these boys that Old Renus had in a way lured to

associate with him, had become as dear to him as if his own. Their admiration, their company and boyish affection for him was all the happiness he now had in his lonely life. They had, as he knew, like all farm boys, their own way to make in life. They would, he expected, desert him when that time came, leaving him alone as before. But he very much wanted to do something for them if the chance came, to endear himself to them.

He did not care for riches himself, he only wanted enough for the final needs of his life, and that he had. But if this ore was the real silver ore, and he had discovered a rich mine, to dispose of it to them would give him the greatest joy of his life. Hence he was now more than anxious to find out if he had really discovered a fortune.

But now the fire had burned low; the tired boys had crept into their bunks, and Old Renus, as he always did, stepped outside to look around ere turning in, himself.

It was a glorious autumn evening. A full moon almost up to the zenith was reflected in the placid pond. A solemn stillness seemed to creep out of the black enclosing forest. As he stood there enthralled by the grim, ghostly, eerie moonlight, a loon far away on the big lake uttered its human halloo. And now, as if to bid defiance, from over where he had found the gray-black ore, came the

distant answer of a wolf howl. Once, twice, it came faintly from afar, a weird, uncanny, creepy baying like naught else in the wilderness. Then, waiting, listening almost breathlessly while a chill dread crept over him, Old Renus heard that ominous call answered by another far up on the mountain side.

"I don't like it, not a little bit," he muttered, entering his barricade door and bolting it. "We'll hev a pack on 'em 'round here soon sure's a gun!"

CHAPTER XII

"WE got to go apple gatherin' today arter we've tended the traps over in the 'bottom,'" Old Renus announced as soon as the boys woke up next morning "I'll lace up three o' the silk blankets fer bags to fetch 'em in while I take a look 'round over thar. Some other bird or crow mebbe might 'a' dropped 'nother apple seed for us 'n' I might find 'nother tree.

"Gatherin' apples 'n' tendin' traps same time 'll seem like bein' home ag'in, won't it, boys?" he added smilingly, now taking their cake of soap and towel and leading the way to the pond.

A light frost whitened the rocks and shale shore of the pond and a faint fog was rising from it. Here and there a restless trout rose to start a circle of faint ripples, while above the green range to eastward the day was dawning.

When breakfast was eaten, Old Renus thrust his camp ax in his belt, picked up the rifle and all

four left the camp just as the sun appeared over the green mountain top.

"I'm goin' to range round the bottom a spell," he said, when the first snare fence was reached, "'n' leave the rifle with you boys to sorter keep ye company while I'm gone. Tend the snares 'n' traps fust 'n' then go fer the apples. I'll jine ye by noon." Then he strode away to the cañon.

He found a blue fox in the trap set at its entrance, which he dispatched at once. Then kept on slowly up the defile, studying the jagged jumble of rocks that filled it, and the broken cliffs to right and left, with the eyes of a mine prospector. He picked up a few bits of the soft black ore and pocketed them. He broke pieces away from big chunks with the head of his ax to examine carefully and then kept on. The defile now broadened out with higher walls, being a big chasm in the low mountain, filled with a chaos of the same black rocks and boulders of all sizes. Beyond, the cañon narrowed until the green overhang met above it; then it divided into two lesser defiles to right and left, and still bore upward.

"A curi's freak o' Natur' 'n' a mighty nice spot fer cats," Old Renus muttered, glancing around. "But if here ain't millions o' tons o' silver ore, all signs fail! Cap rock jest the same ez Dead Man's Gulch that panned out so big. A reg'lar split in

the mountain like that 'n' sorter like whar the Ophir opened out. 'N' the ore is jest the same gray shade. Good Lord, but it's too much to be true!"

Then slowly retreating down this shadowy chaos of moss-covered boulders he finally halted and listened to the faint sound of a hidden brook. He felt a grim sense of awe from the dim silence and the sense of Titanic power that had once split this mountain asunder. For centuries snow had filled this gorge each winter to slowly melt, leaving only a purling rill; and green moss hid what he believed to be a fabulous fortune. No white man had ever come here; only yellow-eyed prowlers, hibernating bears and white-fanged wolves. It was spooky even to him, well used as he was to the unseen presence, ever lurking in such shadowy cañons, deep in a vast wilderness. To him as to all human kind that strange, mysterious something now made him look and listen, while he breathed softly and his heart beat unduly loud. Invisible forms seemed crawling along the cliff tops above. Shadowy shapes slunk into deeper shade, malicious eyes peered out from an overhang. As Old Renus moved on cautiously, even his footsteps on the mossy stones sounded ominous, and emerging into sunlight, he felt grateful for its cheer.

He glanced at the boys, who were grouped around a trap he had set, then turned and followed along the shore of the lake bottom. Soon that curved to the left, the level open broadened out, and the spectral trees seemed to retreat. He kept on for fully two miles, always close to the bank, scanning it, and paying no heed to the partridges scarce troubling themselves to get out of his way or to the deer feeding far out in the open. What he was looking for, he scarce knew himself, but he scanned the border of what he believed had been the lava-filled bed of a volcano. It was entirely surrounded by low mountains. The rill he had heard up in the cañon had vanished, for there was no sign of it at the entrance, and coming to a larger one he followed it out a hundred rods to find that it disappeared amid a tangle of scrub growth.

To the left of this and jutting out from a point, lay a low, curved elevation of bare brown and reddish rock like sandstone and beyond that a depression in which grew a thicket of cane the size of cornstalks. He hurried to this, over the six-inch deep wintergreen carpet, and cutting down a stalk found it hollow.

"Wal, we kin make more candles outer these," he said to himself, recognizing their utility. He cut an armful to carry home, when the thought

struck him that one might be used for a blowpipe with a silk bag for bellows!

"By Gosh!" he exclaimed, excitedly. "I may work it out yit! If only I could find coal I'd do it. Mebbe I kin make charcoal go. I'll try it, anyhow. I've jest got to find if I'm right, or go nutty."

He turned back from here, following the bare rock to the bank again, then on around another curve to a second point. He halted once more to note that the rock was of yellow slate formation, rotten and crumbled, then spied what appeared to be the entrance to a defile, a few rods out from which a doe and fawn were feeding close together. They were perhaps twenty rods away, unconscious that he was watching them, and were outside of a thicket of scrub spruce.

While he was admiring this pretty wildwood picture, Old Renus caught sight of a long gray animal with two white fangs protruding from his jaws, coming out from the undergrowth along the bank, and crouching, move swiftly towards the feeding deer. Only for half a moment was this brief drama visible, then the crouching wolf dashed through the scrub, leaped upon the fawn, and buried his fangs in its neck. At that instant the doe bounded away to halt a few rods off.

Now came a pathetic touch, for as the fawn

gave a bleating call for help, the mother doe leaped back to strike at the wolf with her fore feet. But the fierce animal paid no heed; he bit and tore at the fawn's throat, lapping the gushing blood, until it ceased struggling; then the wolf turned and sprang at the doe. But it was futile, for with a bound she was away like the wind. Old Renus, squatting behind a bush, saw the wolf wheel back to tear at the fawn's throat.

"Darn ye, I wish I had the rifle now," he muttered. "But mebbe 'tain't best. Mebbe I'll want all the shells wuss bimeby." Then he withdrew and hastened back along the bank.

He glanced at the sun, noted it was almost noon, and with his loping stride, soon came in sight of the apple tree and the boys, and found they had stripped the tree and that the bags were full.

"We got two foxes besides the one you killed," Orlo announced excitedly, his round face shining.

"And two mink, one at our trout pool," Jim added.

"A lot more birds, too," chorused Levi. "And one got eat up by a fox. We seen him luggin' it off in his mouth."

"What's the cane for?" Orlo next queried, as they started for camp.

"Oh, I'm goin' to make candles outer them," Old Renus explained. "Jest draw pieces o' cotton

cord up through sections o' these. I can make the cord o' our balloon net. Then I'll set 'em in damp clay 'n' fill up with deer fat. 'N' when it hardens I'll slit away the cane 'n' we've got candles.

"We'll want 'em all to play checkers with by 'n' by, when winter evenin's come," he added. "Ye boys hev got to hev suthin' to do long's ye can't go to parties 'n' see the gals."

"But we hain't any checker boards," declared Orlo.

"Wal, I'll make a couple fast 'nuff," Old Renus smiled again. "That's an easy stunt now; I wish I hadn't any harder one." And it was easy compared to making a blowpipe and smelting a bit of ore.

After dinner he suggested that the boys construct another trout pool above the one now filled with fish. He then set about skinning the foxes they had caught, and stretched their pelts upon stout forked sticks to dry. He also skinned the lynx, and spreading wood ashes over the skin, preparatory to tanning it, he covered that as he had the cat skins with slabs of slate, then taking the rifle and ax he started for the blowdown to build a charcoal pit.

He inspected his bear trap and found it unmolested, then he returned to a ravine opening

eastward, followed it until he came to a level spot at the base of a low cliff, suitable for his object. This he cleared of underbrush, and began cutting small swamp maples and birch trees, chopping them into two-foot lengths, and finally building a conical pile of the sticks, leaving a six-inch opening through the base. He then covered this pile with sods from the bank of the brook, where he had found the clay, and, starting a fire of lightwood under the pile, he waited until it was blazing well, banked the opening and left it to smoulder for a few days. He now had charcoal under way, but whether it would serve to fuse ore was yet to be demonstrated.

He joined the boys later to watch them fishing, while he smoked and rested. It was now over five weeks since they were dropped into this wilderness. In all that time he had not halted his steady work, except to tramp to and from the trapper's cabin, and search for his traps; and the old man was tired. He had also "got a good ready fer winter," as he would express it. The cabin needed a few extra touches; more boughs to be spread over the roof and the two sheds, slabs of slate and clay to be packed around the chimney top to check sparks that might set the green boughs on fire, and a few minor bits of work. More wood must be cut and piled inside and a store of dry pine

cut, split and added to that, all of which the boys could do between times. The deerskins, now nearly tanned, must be cut up and fashioned into raiment—he needed a coat and they needed jackets and pants. Four pairs of socks must be cut from one of the blankets and sewn together. Two more deer must be added to their store of food, and their skins tanned before winter set in.

"Guess I won't bother to pitch the canoe. The boys 'll be kept busy trappin' 'n' fishin' till snow comes. 'N' we got to take out quite a string of pelts, fer some must be sold to pay our way home. I hain't but a few dollars with me 'n' 'bout three more o' that trapper's money." Then he fell to thinking of that trip out, probably down three hundred miles of stream and river with hidden rocks and many rapids, around which the canoe must be carried.

And he was not yet sure they would not come out into Hudson Bay!

"We ain't out o' the woods yet by a long shot," he thought. "'N' on top o' deep snow 'n' way-below-zero weather come them cussed wolves! Jerusalem! but that war a vicious cuss that shot out 'n' jumped onto that fawn today. I s'pose we'll hev a dozen on 'em round the cabin some fine cold mornin'. I'd feel safer if I cud 'a' found a

box or two o' shells that trapper must 'a' hid som'ers round his shack."

The boys, however, had no such worries. To them, with a four-acre pond alive with trout, with many traps set and to be tended with a snug cabin and food aplenty, to say nothing of their fine old hero on guard and watching out for their needs, life here was a delightfully romantic one, more joyous than they had ever dreamed of.

That evening was a homelike one, for the boys began the apple paring; quartering and stringing them on cords to dry, while Old Renus commenced his housewife work by cutting socks from one of their blankets, while he smoked in apparent content. He was grateful that the boys showed no signs of homesickness. They worked willingly; they slept and ate like happy pigs, were up and out with him in the morning, as if to start for a simple day's fishing. They were growing brown and fat and never complained of anything. And Old Renus was quite proud of them.

It was later than usual when they all turned in, but Old Renus was awake at dawn, and on opening the barricade door, was astonished to see a lordly buck standing not three rods away, staring at the bough-thatched cabin.

CHAPTER XIII

OLD RENUS had decided he must keep the few shells he had found for protection against wolves, but that splendid buck, not three rods away, was too much of a temptation, so he stole softly back into the cabin, motioned to the boys to keep still, and a moment later the crack of a rifle echoed across the pond, and so true was his aim that the deer leaped up, shot through the heart.

"We've got fresh venison 'nuff fer two months. Hooray, boys!" Old Renus shouted, darting out to slit the deer's throat while the boys followed him pell-mell. And so they had, for that noble buck must have weighed all of three hundred pounds.

A hasty breakfast followed, and by the time the sun appeared over the mountain, they had that deer skinned, his quarters hung in the shed, and the skin covered with damp ashes and laid under slabs of slate to cure for tanning.

"We'll all go 'n' tend the traps, now," the old man cried. "'N' do it quick. Then I'm cal'latin' we'd best stick a row o' birch poles into our wall 'n' build it up on top o' the ledge jest to kinder shut us in better. I figger cats will git after our meat if they kin."

But it wasn't cats he was most afraid of now.

That wolf darting out of the undergrowth like a gray specter, had been an object lesson, and warned him that it was no longer safe for the boys to go alone to the lake bottom and along its border to tend traps.

The traps and snares as usual scored well. Ten more partridges had poked their unwise heads into nooses, and two foxes had found trout too alluring. On coming to the last trap, however, at the entrance to what Old Renus believed to be a silver mine, a surprise awaited them, for the trap was missing!

The stake pen built around it was almost demolished and a stout stake to which the trap chain had been attached was also gone.

"It's a cat or a lynx, sure's a gun," Old Renus asserted, seeing claw and teeth marks on what was left of the stakes. "He went up the gully," he next declared, spying a well-defined trail on the moss-coated stones. This he followed cautiously, rifle ready for a quick shot. The boys, badly

scared, followed, clubs in hand and well to the rear.

A few rods up this shadowy cañon Old Renus spied two yellow eyes glaring out from beneath a boulder, and the next instant a wild cat leaped out with a snarl and tried to escape.

The trap chain and stake fast to it had been drawn under a rock and so held the trapped animal. But it was a precarious hold, and Old Renus knew that to attack that angry creature now with a club, was a risky thing to do. Yet he hesitated to waste a valuable shell on a bobcat.

"Dern ye, I guess I'll let ye mull a spell," he said, uncertain what to do.

"Why don't you shoot him?" Orlo queried anxiously. "He may break loose and come at us!"

"Wal, the cuss ain't wuth a shell to us, now, Orlo, skin, trap 'n' all. We hain't but a few 'n' I want to save 'em," Old Renus answered firmly. "It's kinder brutal, I s'pose, but guess we'll let the critter alone," and then Orlo realized that the only animals their protector feared were wolves!

He made no answer, for being older than the other two boys, he had more discretion, and saw why Old Renus avoided admitting what he felt.

"We'll take a look at the varmint later on," the old man said, turning away and descending the cañon. "Mebbe he'll break loose 'n' leave us our

trap. But his skin ain't wuth a shot to us now 'n' I don't want to tackle him with a club. It's too risky."

Fortunately for their peace of mind, Jim and Levi failed to grasp the real reason for this action and Orlo said nothing.

When camp was reached, the boys went about cutting birches and Old Renus hurried away to take a peep at his bear trap and the charcoal pit. He knew a week must pass before slow burning would produce charcoal, but he wanted to be sure the smouldering fire was still alive. He found it was, and so pushed on to his bear trap. That had not been molested, in fact he knew it might not be until Bruin decided it was time to take his winter nap. On his way back, however, having crossed to a group of beech trees by the blowdown to fill his pockets with nuts for camp use, he was just in time to see a big black bear bob away in its peculiar clumsy manner.

"I'll see ye later, mebbe, my good fellow," Old Renus ejaculated smiling. "When ye feel drowsy, then I'll come round. I ain't in no hurry now." He filled his pockets with nuts, meaning to roast most of them and pound them fine to add to the rice flour produced in the same way, then taking a look at his other two big traps, hastened back to the cabin. Only a brief halt was made for dinner,

and so hard did they all work that by sunset a fringe of white birch poles close together, protruded from their barricade and an eight foot fence was built across the ledge back of the cabin.

"Looks sorter like a castle, don't it, boys?" Old Renus asked. "All we need is a flag 'n' a pole up 'bove to carry out the idee. It ain't over handsome, howsomever, but we kin feel middlin' safe in it. Cats might climb those poles, but they ain't likely to."

"It will keep out the wolves too, won't it?" Orlo asked, watching Old Renus.

"Sartin, sartin," came the confident answer. "No wolf ud even try to jump that fence 'n' if they happen round we kin laugh at 'em."

All of the next two days, except time spent in trap-tending, were devoted to fuel gathering and minor work on the cabin. A pole floor was laid inside and between the poles moss was stuffed. A hearthstone of clay was laid in front of the fireplace. Two shelves of poles and bark were built along one wall. A bin made of the always available spruce bark, was made to keep apples in, and then, surveying their wildwood home within and without, including all the deer meat and birds now secured and hanging high, with festoons of quartered apples drying, along the front of the bulwark, Old Renus smiled, well pleased.

"We ain't goin' hungry 'n' we kin feel safe," he assured the satisfied boys. "'N' those are the main things. Ez we hev got such a good ready, we kin hev a few days off now while this Injun summer lasts. Fust I want to take a cruise long the west side o' the bottom land 'n' look fer more wild parsnips. When we come to bile our smoked meat they'll go good. In the mornin' we'll fetch up the canoe 'n' spread pitch on it. Then the next day make an 'arly start 'n' go prospectin' downstream a little way. 'N' then we kin fetch back the door o' that old cabin too. It'll make a good table."

And thus did Old Renus plan a few days' change for his boys.

The canoe was brought up the next morning and duly coated with the sap that exudes from pine trees and hardens. The canvas of this old canoe was rotten and rendered the boat unsafe for crossing a wide lake, and hopeless to use on a rocky stream.

A few slices of venison, the wire broiler and some rice biscuits were packed for a midday lunch, and closing both doors of "Camp Castaway," as Old Renus had now named this cabin, they all started for a long tramp around the lake bottom. So far only two or three miles of its eastern border had been visited by Old Renus, and now fol-

lowing the opposite bank, he was confirmed in his idea that this vast open space must have been a lake bed at some prehistoric period. Points jutted out, with deep indentations between them like coves; strips of gravel and sand devoid of vegetation were found alongside; boulders and ledges from beneath which all earth and gravel had been washed away, were from ten to twenty feet above the inward sloping bottom. Across this, in places, patches of bare, black rock rose above the green level; a broad bare stretch of this rock ran out from a point a few hundred rods surrounded by thick-growing wintergreen leaves.

A small brook chattering down a defile further on, was crossed, its devious course outlined by reeds and cattails, and following it to a thicket of canes and rank sedge grass, Old Renus found that it ended there. Another creek a mile beyond, showed the same mysterious disappearance, and what was more surprising, both were alive with small minnows. Here the old man halted to kneel and taste the water, finding it cool and sweet.

"It's curi's, mighty curi's" he said, shaking his head and glancing around, "but I can't see whar these brooks go to. They come from springs up in the moutain, that's sure. Thar must be quite a run o' water in the spring from meltin' snow. But whar it all goes to beats me. Thar must be

cracks in this lake bottom som'ers. So much water couldn't dry up."

"'N' it don't empty into our pond either," he added, after thinking a moment. "The stream out o' that ain't half the size o' this un. The bedrock here looks to me like lava too."

The sun said noontime now, and as sweet water was here in plenty, Old Renus soon had a fire started, and their wildwood lunch was cooked and eaten.

The phenomenon of this lake bottom with a fissure under it seemed wonderful to the boys, and more wonderful was the fact that the water in such a big, deep lake as this must have been, had vanished. It seemed greater in extent than when they had built the first snare fence. They had followed the shore fully five miles now, and yet the vista of spectral trees appeared as distant as ever. A few small trees rose like scrub skeletons across the lake bottom, but were not so impressive as that distant group.

"It's the way ye look at 'em endways," Old Renus explained. "I cal'late this lake must 'a' bin all o' fifteen miles long, 'n' from here across it's about three."

There were other interesting features in this unique panorama. A dozen or more deer scattered all over this green plain; two moose, a bull

and cow, faintly visible near the other shore, and away to the right amid the spectral trees, a small herd of caribou. An eagle was spied slowly sailing over the green expanse, then they saw it suddenly swoop down and rise again with a partridge in his talons.

"We'll follow this brook up a piece, 'n' then go back," said Renus. "We want to take a look at our traps on the way, 'n' it'll be night by the time we git home."

He led the way slowly up this shallow, open ravine, halting to examine each shelf of rock or low ledge, for he was satisfied that volcanic action had taken place here, and that some later earthquake had split the lava bed of this former lake; and since the range of mountains had been rent asunder and either "rotten stone" or silver ore exposed, there was no telling what other ores or minerals might be found.

And the one that Old Renus most wanted was coal!

So far he had seen no surface signs of coal, but he had stumbled onto what he now believed to be silver ore; and recalling the fact that a vein of coal had once been found close by a rich lode of silver in Nevada, he hoped he might find both here; hence his watchfulness.

He carefully scanned this shallow cañon, mainly

bordered by low ledges of trap rock and ironstone, over broad steps of which the brook tinkled. Some twenty rods in and to the left, he noticed a sheer face of moss-coated rock that dripped water, and at its base a slope of reddish, yellow quartz. He stooped to examine it here in shadow, and lo and behold! along its border and separating the quartz from the trap rock, lay an inch wide vein of black! In an instant he was down on his knees, knife in hand, picked out a tiny bit, pounded that on a hard stone with the butt of his knife, rubbed his finger in the powder and found the finger blackened.

Hard coal at last!

"What is it?" asked Orlo, who was close by, and had watched this odd proceeding.

"Oh, nothin' much, only my notion," Old Renus answered nonchalantly, rising. "I'm jest huntin' fer signs o' quakes 'n' what emptied this lake sometime." Then he followed the black line a few feet, kicking the moss away from it.

"The 'arth war pitchin' 'n' tossin' once upon a time round here, boys," he continued, leading the way out of the ravine. " 'N' all sorts o' rocks war shoved up then. I figger too, the lake bed war once boilin' lava. Someday you'll read all 'bout it. I'm curi's 'cause I used to go prospectin' fer miners with a man who'd forgot more'n I ever

knew 'bout such things. I picked up a little, however." And so Old Renus kept his momentous secret.

He did not see its solution in this inch wide vein of coal, however, unless it led to a wider one, and even then he must have some implement to pick out a quart of small bits, at least. He might use his hunting knife with a stone for a hammer, but the knife was too valuable for such use. He still had hopes that charcoal would answer for fuel.

Homeward bound in a direct line across the lake bottom, Old Renus found a pleasant surprise in the shape of a broad patch of the wild parsnips that had grown rankly on a slight elevation. The tops were frost-browned, but were all the better for that, and within ten minutes they had pulled all they could carry.

"We'd better come 'n' git more in a day or two," he said. "When it comes to biled dinners, b'ar pork 'n' smoked venison, they'll go good."

When the cabin was reached, it was a welcome sight to the boys after an all day absence. Once inside the barricade with the door shut and supper cooking, a more than consoling sense of security came to them, and Camp Castaway was indeed a most romantic wildwood home.

Another mood came to Orlo later, when Old Renus began cutting out a deerskin jacket for him

with his hunting knife, for then he flew in thought to his home, and to his mother knitting or darning socks for him beside the evening lamp. With that recollection came the first touch of homesickness.

But worse ones were yet to come!

CHAPTER XIV

AN early start for what promised to be a delightful trip to the boys, was made the next day, and after all the needful things Old Renus decided to take along, including ax, rifle, blankets and his clay cup of pitch, were put in the canoe, they all took their places and away they paddled down the lake.

But a new fear came to Old Renus, for with four in this frail craft, it was loaded down to its margin of safety, even for still water, and to run the rapids of any stream would be more than risky.

And there must be scores of rapids to run in getting out of this wilderness.

But the morn was fair. A warm south wind barely rippled the lake. Deer watched them curiously from along shore. Scattered hardwoods blazed here and there on mountain slopes, and the boys were hilarious over the outing. They had worked manfully at camp building and stocking with Old Renus. With him they could now feel

elated over their wildwood home-making, and enjoy this day and its continual anticipation.

To the old man it was especially enjoyable, for he loved the woods. He had hunted, fished trapped and lived in them many years, and a trip up or down an unknown stream, was to him a wildwood poem. He was a dreamer, with much of the hermit nature too, and while he loved these boys and enjoyed giving them all the outdoor pleasures, he could yet be content for weeks in the woods without seeing a human face.

A stream exploration was always a delight to him. He loved to hear the music of running water and rapids; to watch the banks for all sorts of wild animals; a deer peeping out of a coppice, a heron, frog hunting in a lagoon, a mink crawling out on a bank with a fish in its mouth, or even the ordinary muskrat diving from a log. But best of all to him, was a silent glide down a slowly running river winding its way through the wilderness, while the banks slipped past as in a panorama.

He was curious about this stream he had planned to follow, and he was also anxious regarding its direction, for that meant much to them. He had a faint clue that it was the St. Maurice, or one of its tributaries, for that was the name on the box cover which he had found near the trapper's cabin.

On entering the stream, he found its course was

a straight one almost due north for a mile. It was quite overshadowed by dense growing spruce with beetling cliffs just back on either hand; a split in the mountain range apparently. It was a narrow lane of water, dark and motionless. It seemed a relief to hear the low rumble of a fall, and feeling the current quicken, Old Renus kept a sharp lookout for an opening on either bank that might denote a carry. He soon spied a slight one on the left bank, a few lopped away branches which only a keen woodsman would notice. But Old Renus saw it and with a quick paddle stroke, sent the canoe up to it, whereupon Orlo, in the bow, leaped out into the bushes.

A blazed trail was there; an old one, convincing Old Renus that probably their dead trapper had outlined it. That the canoe must be carried around the rapids ahead was also self-evident, and wasting no time, two packs of their belongings were made for Jim and Levi, while Old Renus and Orlo shouldered the canoe. Tracks in the soft deep moss were plenty, and keeping on sharply downward a hundred rods, what had been a low rumble changed to a roar, and following the trail to the right some ten rods through a tangle of rocks and undergrowth, a white leaping cascade appeared. Old Renus glanced at it as they lowered the canoe to rest, while the boys wondered what would have

happened if they had not pulled out, then they all shouldered their loads and went on. It was a good half mile carry, near the stream that pitched and bellowed over ledges foaming white, and then a tiny lake appeared ahead. Right glad was Orlo to lay down his burden, for his round face was wet with sweat.

"Ye did well, Orlo, and all o' ye," Old Renus commended, smiling at them. "If we come to another ez long we'll turn back. We won't hev time 'n' git home by night."

The canoe was repacked and shoved in once more, and now a pretty sight was seen, for across this lakelet lay a broad lane of foam flecks moving slowly towards the farther end to the right, while to the left and across the main body, a few score of them slowly circled around. At the lake's outlet, a few hidden rocks fretted the slow current, and, landing again, Old Renus crawled through the undergrowth to look ahead. The stream was slow running here, and he soon returned to push out and paddle on again. The range of mountains to the right and back of them trended about northwest. The stream, with only a faint current, seemed to follow it, shut in as it was by a dense growth of massive trees with only now and then a rift of sunlight reaching the water. Here its bottom, now sandy, and now thickly covered by grass

and aquatic plants, was plainly visible. And so it kept on for all of two miles, still bordered by a dense primeval forest of spruce, with trees from two to three feet in diameter; it finally broadened out into a vast swamp of hackmatack and cedar, where it appeared to lose its way. Lagoons opened to right and left, dead trees rose here and there. Pairs and small coveys of ducks, paddled away from so unusual a sight as a canoe, or rose splashing to circle around and light again. Over an hour was lost in trying to thread a way through this network of passages and find the main stream again. It was past noon now, and they paddled a mile of slow running stream before a hard bank and a chance to cook dinner was reached.

Then Old Renus was in a quandary whether to keep on trying to find some clue as to the general direction of this stream, or to turn back. So far this course had been almost due north, but shut in as they were, the range of mountains had not been seen, since the open swamp was crossed.

"I dunno what to do, boys," he admitted finally. "I wanted to git some idee whar we war 'n' which way out, but hain't yit. It'll be dark by the time we kin git home now. That long uphill carry 'll take an hour 'n' I ain't a bit wiser 'n' I war."

"Why not keep on and camp in the woods to-

night?" suggested Orlo, to whom the trip had so far been delightful.

"You can make a bough shelter, can't you?" Jim added.

"And we've got enough to eat?" rejoined Levi.

"O' course, all that's easy," Old Renus answered, "'n' we kin make ourselves comfortable I guess. Mebbe we best keep on till dark. We'll hev to start back arly, howsomever. It's all the way up stream goin' back."

From here onward the wilderness opened out more, showing birch-covered hills, stretches of cedar swamp, and finally a mile long blowdown that had grown up with white birches mingled with stunted pine again. Two short rapids were reached, around which the canoe had to be carried, and just before the last and longest, another stream joined this one. Here Old Renus, always on the watch for signs of anything, brute, human, game or mineral, espied a more recent footprint on the "carry" side of the stream.

"Somebody went up this last fall, 'n' down again in the spring," he announced, after lowering their canoe and examining a few tracks plainly outlined in the moss and soft earth. "'N' thar war two on 'em 'n' one wore moccasins." He picked up their canoe again a little excitedly, and pushing on to where the trail ended beside the stream, lowered

it and hurried around, head down, like a hound hunting for a trail, while the curious boys followed him.

"They camped here," he next announced, coming upon a bed of dry fir twigs through which a few shoots of willow had grown, and upon one side of which lay ferns, now brown and prostrate.

"Camped twice, comin 'n' goin'," he added, kicking the dry bough bed aside. "'N' slept under the canoe both times. 'N' built fire in the same spot 'n' used the same stick to hang a pail on," he continued, pointing to charcoal embers almost hidden by wilted ferns, over which stood a dry, forked stick. "'N' one war a white man 'n' smoked cigars."

Then the boys' eyes opened wide with astonishment, as this wilderness Sherlock Holmes pointed to the butt of a cigar scarcely visible under the brown grass. To them this quick reading of what two men had done here a year ago and then six months later, seemed marvelous.

But the discovery was of scant interest to Old Renus, except that it proved the trappers had spent a season either alongside the vast swamp that had hindered them, or upon the headwaters of the stream just joining their own. He also felt sure that the dead trapper was the only white

man who had ever ascended the stream they had followed out.

And now in double volume it was still running north!

But the sun was well down now. Whatever solution of the question, if any, must be made to-day, or they must remain away from camp two days; so Old Renus pushed their canoe in speedily and paddled on.

From here the stream of double size swept on for a half-mile like a mill sluice with the bottom scarcely visible, then came another open space; a sedge and wild rice swamp, through which the stream wound dark and currentless. By this time Old Renus had grown discouraged, and decided they had better pull out of the stream at the first stretch of hard bank, and camp for the night. He knew it would take an hour to construct a bough lean-to and to bed it, for four could not sleep under a canoe. But no upland appeared until the sun was below the treetops and night near.

And then, just ahead and rising above the cedar bordered swamp, he saw a low spruce covered hill on the left.

Paddling on now with eager strokes they soon came to a bare gravelly point beyond this hillock, and to another quite sizable stream which joined this one from the south. In front of the hill grew

a fringe of brook willows, and back of them a thicket of white birch. A "Hooray, boys, we're all right!" came from Old Renus, quick to discern a good camp site, and in less than a minute he shoved the canoe well out, and camp ax in hand, was up among the birches and chopping down two and three inch ones in a hurried manner.

"Git fir boughs up back o' here, boys," he directed, handing Orlo his hunting knife, "'n' we'll hev a shack up in no time."

They worked quickly, and just as twilight came, a wigwam-shaped shelter was completed, bough covered, with a foot wide door. A fire was started in front, the coffeepot hung over it from a bending wambeck, and while Old Renus broiled slices of venison, the boys cut fir twigs for a bed, and finally added a few armfuls of brown sedge grass from a cluster near the stream.

The sunset glow had faded, the stars began to twinkle down at that wildwood camp, an owl hooted from the nearby swamp, and the low murmur of the stream was the only other sound.

"We're all hunkey fer tonight," Old Renus next asserted, adding fuel to the fire, then lighting his pipe and reclining upon a blanket. "With a few boughs pulled over our wigwam door, we'll sleep warm 'n' snug in spite o' Jack Frost or anything."

"But which way does the stream go; north do

you think?" Orlo asked curiously, knowing why the trip had been taken.

"Wal, it kinder looks so," Old Renus answered nonchalantly. "But it ain't no use in worryin'. We got to foller it anyway, no matter which way it runs. We'll hev to go slow, too, 'count o' a heavy load, but you boys are young 'n' nimble to tote the stuff round carries, 'n' so we won't worry."

The boys, healthily tired, dropped off to sleep one by one, while the old man smoked and laid plans for their ultimate journey out of the wilderness; but when the fire burned low, and it was time to turn in, he, as was his custom, arose to take a look around.

A late rising moon was just appearing as he crept through the willows enclosing their camp. The shadow of the spruce-covered hill back of them lay across the stream in front, while to the right and beyond the other one, a bare curve of sand a rod in width was outlined distinctly in the silvery light.

And there, squatting upon their haunches, sat two big gray wolves!

CHAPTER XV

OLD RENUS was not frightened by the wild denizens of these woods. He knew most of them were more afraid of man than he need be of them. That a bear would bob away out of sight the instant he heard or saw a human being, and that a lynx would crouch watchful a few moments, then slink away, and that the ordinary bobcat was even more timid. All three would fight if cornered, and on rare occasions a starving lynx had been known to attack a human being. Panthers were far more dangerous, but were now practically extinct in these woods.

Wolves, however, were an entirely different proposition. They were no more afraid of man than of a rabbit.

He knew these two, now squatting and watching on the sandy point, had undoubtedly smelt the meat cooking, and all that had kept them away was the glow of their fire, which even wolves fear. On the instant he saw them, white fanged, gaunt

and spectral in the moonlight, he crouched low and crept back through the willows as softly as a cat. He might shoot one and probably the flash and report would scare the other away. But he would not use one of his precious shells. He felt he would need them all later. Instead, he freshened the fire, in fact piled birch wood upon it until crackling flames lit up the bushes all around. He next spread his blanket beside the fire, filled and lit his pipe, and with rifle handy, stretched himself upon the blanket to watch and wait.

He kept the fire blazing cheerfully hour after hour while he lay listening and thinking. The moon climbed slowly up, silvering the dark somber wilderness. A lynx far away yowled as usual. An owl's dismal "hoo hoo-oo" came from somewhere. Another answered from the swamp they had last crossed. A loon's weird halloo quavered through the still night from a distant lake. And still Old Renus lay watchful and alert. Still kept his fire ablaze while the boys slept in peace.

Then after full four hours of this vigil, with the moon almost to the zenith, he picked up his rifle and crept cautiously out of the willows.

The wolves had vanished!

He looked all around, ever listening, for a long five minutes, with eyes upon the bit of beach where they had squatted. But only the faint gurgle of

the streams disturbed the solemn, ethereal night. Then he crept back, added his last few sticks to the fire, piled boughs and birch tops over the wigwam door and with rifle and blanket crawled inside.

But it was fully one hour longer before sleep came to him.

He was awake at the first light of dawn and had the fire blazing cheerfully when the boys emerged.

"Slept well, did ye?" he queried smilingly.

"Fine," answered Orlo, picking bits of sedge grass from his jacket. "Only I got chilly towards morning and woke up once."

They were all shivering and gathered about the fire while Old Renus went for a pail of water for coffee. He soon had more venison broiling, the boys ate ravenously, as usual, and before sunup, they and all their belongings were in the canoe and Old Renus, paddle in hand ready to push off. He did so speedily, and swinging their graceful craft across the stream they had come down, pushed its stern ashore and stepped out.

"What you after?" Orlo queried curiously.

"Oh nothin', jest lookin' 'round," Old Renus answered vaguely. "Ye know I'm allus lookin' 'round." And those boys never knew that he was just then staring down at a dozen big wolf tracks, plainly outlined in the sand, or that their faith-

ful protector had been on guard for four long, lonely hours of the night, while they slept in calm content.

It was a long, tiresome, back and arm wearying paddle upstream, that day, homeward bound. Orlo in the bow kept at it until weary, then Jim changed places with him, and took his turn. Levi "spelled" Jim in due time, while Old Renus continued his long, steady stroke without cessation. When a stretch of shallow quick running water was reached, he picked up the setting pole and shot that "tippy" craft forward, balancing himself like a bicycle rider, and when a carry was reached it became a relief to all of them to get out and lug a heavy load.

"Canoein' down stream is a good deal like spendin' money, boys," Old Renus said, when a stretch of still water was reached. "It goes off so easy ye don't think. Jest seems to vanish same ez a river bank goes by. But it's savin' ez comes hard, like upstream paddlin'. 'N' ye got to keep at it steady to 'mount to anything."

A brief halt and rest was taken at midday to make coffee and eat smoked venison, and the sun was well down ere the long uphill carry was reached. And Orlo, exhausted when he finally lowered his end of the canoe at its head, laid down in the bottom of it when it was launched again,

and let Jim paddle for an hour. It was almost dark when Old Renus finally pushed the canoe prow out on the sandy beach upon which they had first stepped foot over six weeks before, and even he was more than glad to lay aside his paddle.

Camp Castaway rose spectral in the gathering darkness as they drew near to it, and the cheery fire being started, it seemed more like a real home to the boys, and doubly so to Old Renus, for within its protecting barricade he felt no more fear from lurking wolves.

Supper was soon cooking; an ample one of four broiled partridges, two slices of grilled venison and hot coffee with rice biscuit warmed up in the old trapper's tin baker.

Did that wildwood meal taste good, some boy may ask? And did they now stuff themselves full?

In reply we say let any hardy farm boy go into the zestful, balsamic wilderness, arise and eat at daylight, paddle a canoe all day with merely a bite at noon, and then, after twelve hours, have a whole broiled partridge and a slice of grilled venison, juicy and sweet, set before him, then answer the question.

But Old Renus was not only wearied but glum. So far as he could now determine, the stream, that must be their only avenue of escape, ran north to

Hudson Bay. That could be reached, of course, by a month or six weeks' canoe journey; then they could reach Quebec or Halifax by freight and trading vessel. To make that trip, they needed money, possibly two hundred dollars or more, to say nothing of the civilized raiment that must be bought. And his entire cash capital was less than five dollars! Clearly their only means of reaching home must be by the sale of furs.

Then the canoe question recurred, also the wolves.

One other proof that Hudson Bay must be their way of escape had come to him that day, and that was the fact that no lumberman had ever penetrated this wilderness. Timber of the finest, monster spruce, fir, larch and pine grew alongside the sweeping stream they had followed, yet no tote roads opened from it. No stranded and rotten logs lay beside it. Large and small game and forest prowlers being so numerous was proof conclusive that only a few trappers had ever penetrated these wilds, and not one had come to where they were. But wearied as he now was he did not even take his usual look around before retiring, so after locking the outer door he crept into his narrow bunk and was soon asleep.

Morning brought a prospect of rain, so the first duty was to look over their snares and traps.

Rifle in hand, Old Renus led a hurried trip to the lake bottom. Here, after two days, havoc had come to many of their snares, for while ten birds had been noosed and lay strangled awaiting their captors, as many more had been devoured by foxes or cats. Two hours were consumed in rebuilding the broken sections of fence, then they hastened away to the fox traps. And out of the five set at suitable spots, four had scored and two blue and two yellow foxes were added to their bag. A bit of luck came also, for on reaching his supposed silver mine cañon, the old man found that the trapped lynx had gnawed its fore paw away and escaped. He picked up a few more bits of the black ore, took the trap back and reset it, this time locking its chain around a four inch by ten foot sapling.

"It's a runway fer cats, this gorge is," he assured the boys, "'n' if we ketch one ag'in it'll bother him some to git far away."

Three of the mink traps around the pond had caught three long black fellows, the two beside the trout pools both scoring and scooping out a couple of speckled trout, Old Renus hurried on to his two big lynx traps. One of these held a yellow-eyed prisoner, soon clubbed into quietude and by mid-forenoon they were back at camp with the best string of game and pelts so far secured. And

now, leaving the boys to skin mink and foxes, Old Renus betook himself to the blowdown again for a peep at his bear trap and charcoal pit. The first was as he had left it, the latter still smouldering, and after once more filling his pockets with beechnuts he returned to camp. And just in time, too, for a cold rain was falling. This soon developed into a driving storm that roared through the woods and lashed the pond into tiny waves.

"We're lucky not to 'a' got caught away from camp," said Old Renus, starting a fire in the cabin to cook dinner. More than pleased was he to find that only a few drops of rain came through the slate roof. The barricade kept the wind away, the cabin remained dry and warm in spite of the driving storm, and being so tested, Old Renus felt that his unique shelter was all he had hoped for. He proceeded with his tailor work that afternoon, setting the boys to sewing on the deerskin garments, and by supper time warm jackets for each of them had been made. A lull soon came in the storm, and Orlo and Jim were sent to the trout pools to fetch enough fish for supper and these fried in deer fat made a most delightful meal.

Work was kept up that evening by candle and firelight, while the storm raged outside. Realizing how many long days and weeks they must be absolute prisoners here, the old man knew that

some employment must be given to these boys, to keep them contented. Ice fishing would help on warm days, whether they needed the trout or not; a path shoveled to the white birch grove and fuel cut would also serve when deep snow came. Work on a canoe frame would be a mainstay when shut in. But tending traps and snares would be out of the question. So Old Renus planned ahead for what he knew would be a monotonous life for four or five months.

He plotted a unique reception also for the gray brutes he knew would come sneaking around his barricade in due time, and decided to cut and fetch small logs to attach to all their traps, and set the entire fourteen around their barrier.

"That'll make it sorter lively fer 'em," he thought, chuckling over his plan. "Kinder gin 'em a middlin' cheerful howdedo, I cal'late. 'N' those who 'scape the traps won't do a thing to the ketched ones."

Morning brought no cessation of the storm, but being snug and dry now, the castaways kept busy at garment making, while the forest moaned and creaked in the gale. A lull came late in the afternoon, and then Old Renus decided that the traps and snares had better be visited.

"Mebbe this marks the end o' Injun summer," he asserted, "'n' a cold snap 'll come now. We may

git a week or two o' open weather, 'n' arter that, snow. We best build more fences 'n' keep after the birds while we kin."

Only a few partridges had left cover to get noosed during the storm, and the next morning with ice now bordering the pond, Old Renus, carrying rifle and camp ax, and the boys with an outfit for an outdoor dinner, hastened over to the lake bottom to build fences. Four more were run out from its western border some two hundred rods apart, and then Old Renus, selecting a sunny nook out of the wind, set up an open fireplace of stones, and broiled venison and made coffee.

Three more fences, making fifteen in all, were then noosed for business that afternoon, and returning, a good string of birds was carried to camp.

It was not yet sunset, however, and Old Renus, with mind on his bear and the charcoal pit, hurried away to look after them. It was almost twilight when he drew near to the dark, forbidding corner where the trap was set, and with rifle ready, he picked his way cautiously forward step by step.

One, two, three steps, with eyes and ears alert, and always stepping upon some stone or fallen tree, and a "By Christmas, I've got him!" came.

The trap and heavy log were missing!

CHAPTER XVI

FOR many weeks Old Renus had hoped to catch a bear, for it meant not only smoked hams, salt pork and lard, but a skin that would keep them all warm during the coldest night. But not until he found the first big trap did he know it was possible. He had read of how one fakir in the Maine woods had once claimed that he lured a bear into a shallow pit and killed it with a half rotten club, but he knew that was a fool tale that would not even deceive a man who had only read about bears! But now he had Bruin in a trap and knew he could easily be trailed and killed.

The woods were growing shadowy and Old Renus turned back; he strode on hurriedly, oblivious of everything, so satisfied was he, until he was almost at the entrance to the blowdown; then he stopped short, for at that instant a big buck sprang from behind a thicket not two rods away and halted with head up, listening. And the next in-

stant, Old Renus had fired point blank at the deer to see it bound high, leap forward three times and tumble—dead!

It was all over in less than a minute and never before had he shot one so like a bird on the wing. He slit the deer's throat speedily, then hastened on to meet the excited boys, who hearing the shot had visions of a bear or lynx being the quarry.

"What was it?" they shouted in unison.

"Oh, nothing but a deer," came nonchalantly, as if shooting one was of no account. "He jest bobbed out in sight 'n' I shot 'fore I thought. We don't much need him 'cept his skin. I've got a b'ar trapped!"

This was wonderful news for the boys, and surely the most exciting event of their lives was now in store for them, for they had never even seen a bear.

That evening appeared interminably long while Old Renus described how Bruin must be trailed, often a mile or more away through woods and swamps. How cautiously an approach must be made, lest Bruin break loose and turn pursuer. How he had known of a bear, having treed the man after him, had then watched him for a full day and night.

"B'ars are wise critters; 'most human," Old Renus concluded. "'N' know more 'n' any animals

here 'cept beavers. They'll run the minute they ketch sight of a body, generally long afore they're seen. But once trapped or wounded, they go at gittin' revenge wuss 'n' Injuns."

And on the morrow they were to face this danger! It was no wonder the boys saw bears in their dreams that night.

This one led them a long pursuit the next morning; over a mile. He had left the blowdown to ascend the mountain east of their cabin, and how he had managed to drag a ten-foot by six-inch log through undergrowth among thick trees was a mystery. He had been halted, however, by a tree and rock close together, and with a hind paw holding him prisoner, rose up fully five feet as Old Renus drew near. A snarling growl came next and just then the boys, well back and huddled together, looked for trees to climb. They scarcely breathed as Old Renus knelt down and took careful aim. A spit of fire came, followed by a roar of rage from Bruin, who still rushed on. Another report rang out through the somber forest, and then that king of all wilderness brutes gave a final screaming roar, toppled over growling, and died with a whimpering cry like a child.

"Kinder cruel to do it," Old Renus admitted as the boys bounded up, still quivering from fear. "But we needed a b'ar the wust way."

"It's goin' to be butcherin' day with us now, boys," he added as they looked down at that black, shaggy monster as big as a barrel. "We'll drag him down the mountain fust howsomever 'n' then go at it."

It took an hour to haul that big bear to camp and two more before he was skinned, dressed and hanging inside their barricade. Then came the deer.

"Guess we've got meat 'nuff 'n' some over," Old Renus declared, when the butchering was all finished. "But we'r' goin' to need a lot this winter."

And so it appeared to the boys; for the two deer and this bear hanging in their shed, all of six-dozen partridges and the smoked venison lining the cabin rafters, seemed more meat than they could eat in a year.

But a little disappointment came to Old Renus to mar this day of big game slaughtering, for the rain had put out his coal pit fire and he had to do his work over again. More birds were added to their catch next day, however, and at least a bushel of wild parsnips was brought in; the festoons of drying apples hung out again, and then Old Renus felt satisfied.

And well he might, for they now had more supplies than they could consume in six months.

"I s'pose I might ez well let the boys ketch

birds to keep 'em busy," he soliloquized. "We'll eat them all anyway. 'N' they're only goin' to waste here."

He next cut his pine trees to make a canoe frame, two more paddles, and two snow shovels; for he knew all would be needed. He also cut a half-dozen extra big white birches and dragged them to camp, to use in the "welcome" he meant to give the wolves when they came around. Then one warm morning, a week later, he left the boys fishing, and with a silk blanket, a piece of hollow cane and bits of ore, betook himself to his coal pit to try and solve the question that had now vexed him for two weeks.

It was quite a problem to rig bellows and construct a crucible out of slate slabs and blue clay. He rigged an apology for one, however.

He packed bits of charcoal tightly inside, put two bits of ore on them with more charcoal on top, and started his fire and his bellows.

The question he meant to solve was so momentous to him and to his beloved boys that, stolid man that he was, he felt himself tremble.

And no wonder, for locked fast in those bits of ore lay the secret of fabulous wealth—or nothing!

But not yet would these bits of gray-black ore give up their secret. Vainly did Old Renus pump away on his crude and leaky makeshift bellows,

until the charcoal blazed in blue-white flame and the bits of ore grew crimson. No tiny rill of gray lead or white silver ran out. Again and again did he add charcoal and blow longer and harder. It was futile. The secret of centuries could not thus be solved.

"I got to give it up fer now," the old man sighed. "Got to hev hard coal 'n' slabs o' slate that fit tight. 'N' a bellows that don't let out most o' the air." But how to pry out enough bits of coal from that tiny vein without ruining his sheath knife was another problem.

He had little to do now except to cure his bear meat, tan the two skins, and add a few more pelts to their string before snow came. All he could do to the camp had been done. It was as secure and comfortable a shelter as it was possible to construct in the woods with only a knife and an ax. More than enough food to last through a long cold winter had been secured. Snow would soon fall; it was long past due in this far north region. Ice formed on the lake borders each night; the wild ducks and geese had all gone southward, and the loons had followed. The feel of snow was in the air.

"We'll take up the traps over 'long the bottom this arternoon," he declared, returning to camp. "They hain't bin doin' much lately. 'N' tomorrow

we'll go up the stream at the head o' the lake 'n' set 'em fer mink 'n' fisher. Mebbe we might git an otter or two."

One more fox, a blue one, was found in the round-up. Half a dozen more birds added to their larder. The mink and big traps were now brought in, and the next morning they made an early start for the stream entering the lake. Garbed in their new deerskin garments and moccasins, the boys much resembled young Indians.

This way of trap setting was a new and interesting experience to the boys, and as Old Renus paddled up the narrow, winding, swamp-bordered and currentless brook, the method seemed the most romantic one possible, and kin to their erstwhile boyish plans.

When Old Renus backed their canoe into a tiny cove and set a trap, fastening it to a stake, and covered it with moss and hung a half a trout over it for bait, they watched him breathlessly, quite sure that in such a spot it must score; perhaps within an hour or two.

During these two months of real wilderness life they had many delightful and quite perfect hours in building snare fences, setting traps, and tending them later. But none compared with those two hours when, clad as noble Redmen, and squatting in a canoe, they followed that dark, devious stream

to halt now and then and watch the old hunter place the traps.

They must surely catch something, for the place teemed with game. Two muskrats slid off from rocks within sight. An otter was seen swimming just around a bend in the stream, diving the instant they appeared; and a mink was spied watching them, quite unafraid, from beneath a moss bank. A quarter of a mile further on, and with seven of their ten traps set, the stream forked and down the smaller one two or three bits of green bark and stems of aquatic plants came floating.

"Looks like a beaver's work," Old Renus asserted, picking one green stem up and examining it. "Guess we'll take a look-in up this brook." He paddled and pushed their light craft along until the brook grew too shallow and the sound of falling water came to them. Renus stepped out, drew the canoe onto the bank, picked up the three spare traps and camp ax, and, followed by the excited boys, made his way on up through the tangle of alders and cedar beside the brook for a hundred rods more. Here he halted, stooped, beckoned to the boys and whispered, "I knowed it, here 'tis."

And looking under the dark thicket they saw an opening, and across the brook's course a dam,

four feet high, of small logs, saplings and brush.

They had come upon that marvel of animal craft, a beaver dam.

"Keep still, boys," Old Renus once more whispered, advancing again. "We may ketch one out sunnin'." But none were in sight, for a beaver's hearing is more than acute and these wise animals had no doubt heard them from afar. The dam was built of cross logs, four to six inches in diameter and as many feet long, on supports. A sloping cover of smaller logs was laid crossways above them, and over this was a thick mat of brush, sedge grass, moss and mud. A pond of fully two acres lay above this dam, and rising from it were the oval tops of three sod and grass mounds that the beavers lived in. Below the dam the stumps of small trees and saplings showed where the supports for the dam had come from.

"Wonderful, ain't it, boys?" Old Renus commented as they looked about astonished. "No human could 'a' built a dam like that with what they hev, teeth, paws 'n' a broad flat tail. 'N' ye notice the dam is high in the middle 'n' tapers down ez the land slopes up, so it's level across the top? Ain't that reason?

"We'll try 'n' trap one," said Old Renus, "'n' that's a cunnin' trick to do." And so it appeared to the boys who watched him curiously. He went

to a spruce tree below the dam, peeled three strips of bark from it each about four feet long. Laid one and then another down alongside a well defined runway at one end of the dam to enable him to step upon this bark walk and reach the water's edge. Here he set a trap with its chain fast to a driven stake, all under water. He then covered the trap with fine water grass and leaves which he secured from the brook. Next he spread a few aquatic plant roots taken from the brook in the runway above the trap, then retreated, picking up his bark walk as he did so.

"Mustn't leave any tracks for 'em to smell," he explained, returning to the boys, who were watching below the dam. "If ye do, it's all off fer ketchin' a beaver." He set the other two traps in the same careful manner, one midway the dam and one at its other end.

"Beavers are hard to ketch," he still further explained, leading the way to the canoe again. "Harder 'n' even a b'ar, I cal'late. 'N' if ye ketch one in a runway ye won't 'nother fer at least a week in the same spot, fer they git wise easiern 'n' we do. I hope we'll ketch a couple anyway, fer their pelts are wuth 'bout fifty dollars now, 'n' I want to gin ye a taste o' br'iled beaver tail. It's the sweetest meat ye ever tasted."

So impressed were the boys by that trip up this dark, winding, mysterious stream, culminating in the finding of the beavers' dam, that they lived it all over again that night, in their dreams.

CHAPTER XVII

WHEN Orlo, a few years before, had set three traps for muskrats in an alder swamp on his home farm, he dreamed of them that night, and when morning came could scarcely wait to do his chores before scampering pell-mell across lots to visit them. But that keen anticipation—to secure a two-shilling skin—was not half as compelling as his present hope of catching an otter worth perhaps twenty dollars, or, better still, a beaver valued at double that. Besides, a beaver, which he had never seen, seemed with its human cunning a more than marvelous animal. And Jim and Levi were equally excited over the situation.

All three were awake at dawn with Old Renus. They donned their new, ill-fitting deerskin garments, feeling as though they were noble Red Men. They hastened down to the pond to break the thin ice and dip a bark basin of water to wash in, and could scarcely wait for Old Renus to broil four

slices of bear steak for breakfast. He shared their excitement in minor degree, but mainly because those valuable skins were light to carry out and they would need many to pay their way home.

Before starting to visit the newly-set traps, the boys dipped a half-dozen small trout out of their pool for bait. The camp was closed, and with Old Renus following, rifle in hand, they scampered down through the neck of woods to their canoe like bird dogs ahead of a hunter. When the prow of their craft entered the mouth of the mysterious stream, never before had they felt such keen anticipation. To visit the line of swamp brook traps in a canoe was an experience thrilling in its allurement.

There was reason for that feeling at this hour —the sun was not yet above the spruce-clad range east of the swamp; the stream wound like a Titanic python amid dense alders and birches and now and then a group of hackmatack or cedar meeting above it, and the alder thickets were white with frost. Here and there a huge dead tree rose like a specter out of the shadow, while to add an ominous impress, wreaths of ghostly fog floated away from the black water ahead. It was silent as a tomb in here also. The splash of an animal out of sight came with weird distinctness and as Renus

slowly and silently propelled the canoe into this somber swamp, it seemed as if even the fragile craft feared to enter.

But some of this illusion vanished when Old Renus swung the canoe stern foremost into the little inlet where the first trap had been set, and the boys saw the bait was gone. They watched him breathlessly as he reached over and drew the trap chain with trap and big drowned mink out of the black water. Anywhere else they would have exclaimed gleefully over this luck. Now not a whisper escaped them.

All of this uncanny feeling was banished by the next trap, for here a fine otter had torn sedge grass and bushes away from the bank in trying to escape, finally to end his own life as the mink had done.

"He's a rouser 'n' 'll fetch all o' twenty dollars," Old Renus whispered gleefully, laying the sleek, glossy, two-foot long prize beside the mink. Then he set and baited the trap again and pushed out into the stream. The boys did not comment above a whisper, for they felt that the time, place and the beaver dam not far away made silence obligatory. They noticed that Old Renus kept his paddle under water to twist it and thus urge the canoe on slowly without a sound or even a ripple. They were deep in the swamp now. Its vastness seemed

more ominous and the spectral trees more ghostly. The day previous, with sun overhead, it had appeared less so. Now in shadow it grew uncanny. And so, while Old Renus slowly twisted and turned the canoe in their devious course, halting to tend the traps in silence, not a whisper or sound came to disturb that weird silence.

But luck did, for out of those seven traps, set as only Old Renus could set them, six had scored, and when the fork in the stream was reached, four mink and a fisher lay beside the otter in the canoe. And after pushing up the brook that came from the dam to shallow water once more, Old Renus signified his plans by tapping his lips, then pointing to the boys' feet.

Well did they understand what he wished.

He laid his paddle down without a sound and stepped out as noiselessly. He drew the canoe up without breaking a twig, and like a cat creeping up to a bird, led the way up through the undergrowth to a point near the beavers' dam. They crept close to the dam slowly, step by step, to finally raise their heads and peep over it.

And now the enthralled boys beheld what they had never even hoped to see—two beavers, double the size of woodchuck, and glossy brown, sitting upright upon a sod house, watching, while three more swam in the pond!

The sun was shining full upon its placid surface, glinting from the ripples the swimming animals made, while, to add charm to the secluded home they had built for themselves, it was almost surrounded by white birches and stunted poplars with leaves now golden. For a long five minutes those four visitors, crouching below the dam, gazed on this alluring picture, and then, as if an electric shock had come to those sagacious creatures, the watching ones dove in simultaneously and the swimming ones vanished at the same instant.

"Show's over 'n' curtain down," sang out Old Renus, rising. "Now let's see if we've caught one."

He hurried to the end of the dam, stooped quickly and drew the missing trap out of water and in it was a monster drowned beaver that thrilled the boys as never a trapped prize had before.

"But ain't you going to set the trap again?" Orlo queried anxiously, as Old Renus led the way around to the other trap.

"Not thar, or mebbe anywhere ag'in fer a few days," the old trapper answered. "The rest are too cunnin' to git caught in the same spot ez one did fer a long spell."

"But what made him drown himself?" Jim next asked.

"Wal, it's the way all water animals hev, mink,

fisher, otter 'n' martin, same ez mus'rats. 'N' if they can't draw the trap into water deep enough, they'll gnaw a paw off to git away. I've known a beaver to do that, anyway."

Another glossy brown prize was drawn out at the other end of the dam, and feeling of its thick, silky fur, the boys found that not a drop of water had penetrated it. "That's funny," commented Orlo, "I'd think his fur would soak in water."

"'Twill in time, say in an hour or two," Old Renus responded. "This beaver, in fact both on 'em, war caught 'arly this mornin'. 'N' it's seldom ye ketch two at the same time. One in a trap 'll keep all the rest from goin' ashore anywhere fer two or three days, they're that cunnin'."

"And how many live in this pond?" Levi asked.

"Wal, from a dozen to twenty, judgin' by the way they've thinned out the young poplars long this bank ez ye notice. If the pond war drawn off you'd find bundles o' poplar sticks stuck under roots or with stones on 'em to keep 'em down. 'N' in the houses, bushels o' roots they've stored away fer winter. That's whar beavers live then, comin' up into their houses to take a nap or hev a breathin' spell. 'Bout once or twice a day they hev to do that."

The third trap was found unmolested, and taking all three, with Jim and Orlo proudly carrying

the two beavers by their broad flat tails, they returned to the canoe.

"Purty middlin' good ketch fer one mornin'," Old Renus asserted, smiling down at his prizes in the canoe, while pushing it into the shallow brook. "'Most two hundred dollars wuth ez furs are sellin' now. 'N' tomorrow night we'll hev broiled beaver tail fer supper. Jest skin 'n' salt 'em 'bout six hours fust, 'n' when ye eat 'em ye'll lick yer fingers they'll taste that good. We'll set these three traps 'bove here," he added, reaching the main stream again. "No use in tryin' fer beaver ag'in right off. We got to wait till the scare wears away." And when those traps were set, and the canoe pointed out of the swamp once more, the boys felt like shouting, for never had they enjoyed such a supremely happy forenoon. A red letter one, never to be forgotten.

The ghostly impress of the dead trees and the ominous one of that black, winding stream had both vanished.

Half a dozen more of the stupidly tame partridges were added to their ample store that afternoon, and in addition to them a bushel of wild parsnip roots was pulled from the big bed away out in the bottom land.

The next morning's trap-tending up that motionless stream, winding midway through a half-mile-

wide swamp, proved what a favorite abiding place it was for mink, fisher and all that fish-eating branch of the cat family, for another otter and six more of the smaller fur-bearing animals were secured. The last trap, set in the mouth of a rill entering the main stream a mile in and near hard soil, while baited for mink, had caught a muskrat.

"Must 'a' blundered in," Old Renus explained, pitching the big "squash" into the canoe as if it was worthless. "We ain't skinnin' those, be we, boys?" he asked, while a look of disgust came to Orlo.

"Not for two shillings apiece up here," Orlo answered contemptuously. "I did it once glad enough, I s'pose, but then I hadn't known anything like this."

"Kinder goin' to spile the old alder swamp-fer ye boys when ye git home, ain't it?" Old Renus rejoined, smiling as he set the trap again. "It's allus the way with good fishin' 'n' huntin'. 'N' jest the same with eatin'. When all the layout war corned beef, taters 'n' bread ye pitched in 'n' filled up on that 'n' thought it tasted mighty good. But when ye set down to a Thanksgivin' dinner o' roast turkey, chicken pie, plum puddin', four other kinds o' pie, nuts, raisins 'n' ice cream to top off, why, ye wouldn't tech corned beef to start on.

"I noticed tother day when I watched ye fishin'," he added, after filling and lighting his pipe and picking up his paddle, "that when one o' ye boys lost a two-pound trout ye didn't even yip. Jest baited up 'n' kept on fishin' ez if nothin' happened. But if ye lost a two-pounder fishin' in Mizzy Brook you'd 'a' bin heart-broke. 'N' it's the same in settin' snares 'n' trappin'. Once I kin rec'lect when one o' ye ketched a mus'rat wuth a couple o' shillin's or less, mebbe, ye lugged it home prouder 'n a peacock. Now ye wouldn't skin one." And then the boys joined in laughter with Old Renus.

"It's goin' to be the same way with ye boys when ye git on in life 'n' well off," he continued more philosophically. "Not here I mean, but home. Thar, when ye waded a brook barefoot 'n' ketched a string o' six-inch trout, ye thought it war a prime day's sport 'n' trudged home happy ez larks. When ye grow up, ye won't look at an alder pole 'n' spice box fer worms, but ye'll want a steel rod, waders, creel 'n' fly-book to start on. 'N' less ye kin go whar thar's big trout 'n' salmon, ye won't enj'y it at all. Or not overmuch, anyway. Gittin' cloyed on anything spiles it."

That afternoon, with his hopes and heart set mainly upon the riddle of his supposed silver

mine, Old Renus left the boys to amuse themselves filling up the trout pools and betook himself over to it. He broke large chunks of the ore into small pieces with his camp ax, the better to examine it and see how this ore compared with the real silver-lead ore as he recalled it fresh from the mine. He pounded bits into powder to study that in strong light and tried his best to recollect just how the bogus "fool ore" looked thus examined. He followed the cañon up to its apex to study the overlying rock and also to find some spot where the black ore merged into that.

"It looks like the real stuff," he said to himself, returning to the mouth of the cañon with a few bits of inside ore. "I'd bet money on it, too, if I war a bettin' man," he added, nodding as if to assure himself. "Hez the feel, the look 'n' color o' the genuine, 'n' I believe 'tis, sure's a gun! 'N' Lordy, Lordy, if only 'tis, what a s'prise I'll hev fer the boys," he continued, looking far away over the lake bottom to the vista of skeleton trees and sighing.

"They've bin a heap o' comfort to me, these few years, bless 'em," he continued, with eyes still upon the vista of spectral trees. "More'n I ever s'posed boys could be. But if only one war mine, only one." And he sighed.

For a long ten minutes he sat and watched that

vast almost level green area, with here and there a flame of scarlet and brown. He watched the green range, undulating to westward, with its border of yellow birches, and yet saw them not, for he had gone back to his own lost youth, in a vine-hidden porch, the odor of syringas, and fireflies twinkling over a meadow.

"Wal, I've got to find out, if I kin. I jest can't wait," he asserted finally, and even as he had once before put all heart call aside, so did he now arise to stride firmly across to the brook defile where he had discovered the tiny vein of coal. He had brought a couple of long wire nails which he had found in the deserted cabin, and with these and his camp ax, now set about chipping bits of coal out of the rock. Only a few little lumps the size of a bean could be thus obtained, then the vein appeared to end. He tried another, and, in fact, a half-dozen spots, only to find the same result, and he concluded that this vein was scarcely more than a marking across the brook dingle.

"Thar's coal 'round here," he declared finally, "or under here anyway. 'Arthquakes war once cavortin' under the crust o' 'arth here, I cal'late, 'n' mebbe squoze up a rim o' coal. It's hereabouts sure."

The prospector once more, he began sleuthing

around this shallow ravine. Up and down, along its border, then on top of the ledge above the sheer-faced rock from which a hidden spring dripped, he went peeping and peering, until at last and back of the ledge, he came upon one knob of black hard coal the size of a man's fist half embedded in rock.

But not a vestige or sign of any more.

"I got to gin it up fer now I guess," he sighed, disconsolately, glancing at the sun, now almost down to the treetops. "But I'll take a peek 'long this range 'fore I quit fer good." Then he started for camp once more. He had quite forgotten what he had in mind in leaving camp, which was to look the snares over on his way back, and not until he came to a brush fence did it occur to him again. He looked this over hurriedly, found two birds in it, set the snares again, and trotted on to the next one to secure three more. And by the time he had inspected all the snares along that side of the lake bottom, it was nearly dark and he had a string of eleven birds. He almost ran the rest of the way to camp, to meet the boys near it, who were so frightened they were on the verge of tears.

"Oh what happened to you, Uncle Renus?" Orlo cried piteously. "We were awfully scared soon as it began to grow dark."

"Oh, nothin'," he assured them. "Jest been takin' a look 'round 'n' stopped to fix some snares."

And so overjoyed were the boys, that Jim and Levi grabbed the birds, and Orlo took his hand to escort him to camp.

CHAPTER XVIII

ONLY a few more fair Indian summer days consoled the castaways, and on each morning they paddled up the dark winding stream to look the traps over. Each afternoon the snares were tended, and both traps and snares returned ample results. Old Renus stole away one afternoon to follow the range west of the lake bottom, looking for signs of coal, but with scant results. A short shallow seam of it was found a quarter of a mile beyond the other one and that was all.

"Looks like I'm stumped fer a spell," he admitted. "But I kin stake out a claim. Make a sorter drawin' o' the gorge, 'nother o' the lake bottom, 'n' file all o' the proof at Quebec if we're whar I hope. Then I could hire a man 'n' come here ag'in."

Something of more pertinent interest occurred just now, though, and that was an immediate change in the weather. They had been favored

by an unusually long spell of Indian summer with frosty mornings only; but now the many signs of a change were clear to Old Renus.

"It's grown cold purty fast," he declared. "Thar's bin a ring 'round the sun fer two days now 'n' a sun dog near it. It'll freeze hard to-night 'n' tomorrow, 'n' warm up arter that, 'n' then we'll git a fall o' snow, mebbe a foot or two. That's the way it comes up here. I think we best go 'n' take up the traps 'n' fetch the canoe up to camp. If we don't pick 'em up now we can't till spring."

Being thus warned, the trip was decided upon and made in a hurry.

It was almost dark when Old Renus and Orlo with the canoe on their shoulders, and Jim and Levi carrying traps and paddles, picked their way up through the neck of woods between the big lake and camp, and a sorry procession it was to the boys. So far everything had been to their liking. A two months' camp building, trapping and fishing episode now appeared to have reached its finale, and grim winter, so long dreaded, was close at hand.

"We'll cover the canoe with boughs in the mornin'," Old Renus declared, as he and Orlo turned it bottom up in front of the ledge near the camp. "We probably won't use it ag'in anyway."

That last act in the gathering darkness seemed to the boys grouped around like the conclusion of a funeral. And Old Renus knew exactly how they felt.

"We got to chirk up 'n' count our blessin's now, boys," he said, after they entered camp and he began to start the fire. "'N' we've got a lot on 'em too. I figger we've got most a thousand dollars wuth o' fur to say nuthin' 'bout the b'ar. Thar's two beaver, three lynx, six bobcats 'n' all o' eighty small skins. All we can possibly carry out. 'N' ez fer game to eat, why we'll hev to leave a pile fer the cats when we go.

"'N' do ye know what we're goin' to hev fer supper tonight?" he continued, as the fire began to blaze cheerfully. "Wal, it's br'iled beaver tail fer a side dish 'n' birds fer the main one. Kin ye beat it? I'm goin' to gin the birds an extra tech 'n' gash 'em with thin slices o' b'ar pork.

"Oh, we're goin' to hev some fun yit," this cheerful optimist declared when they all sat down to this wildwood banquet, and he saw that the clouds had not quite vanished from the boys' faces. "When snow comes, we kin dig paths to the pond 'n' trout pools 'n' do some ice fishin' on warm days. 'N' jest to show the cats we hain't forgot 'em, we'll set a few traps fer them."

"But suppose the wolves come round, what

then?" queried Orlo, voicing the general fear.

"Wal, we're ready fer them, too," smiled Old Renus, assuringly. "But they may not come arter all. I'm kinder half-willin' they should, howsomever, jest to ketch one or two in traps 'n' hear 'em howl while the rest eat 'em up. That'll be music in my ears."

But it did not seem so to the boys.

The evening was passed in sewing on deerskin bags to draw on over moccasins and up to their knees.

Morning brought an overcast sky, a keen north wind and three inches of ice to be cut through on the pond to get water. They did not hurry about breakfast, though it was fried bear ham with boiled parsnips for the first time. A new kind of coffee was also tried; made of three parts scorched beechnuts to one of coffee.

"'Tain't so wuss," Old Renus asserted, testing it. "I've made it out o' all beechnuts many a time. I guess we better go arter more today," he added later. "We've got 'bout two quarts o' them now but we'll need a lot more." After leaving the camp snug and fire well banked, they started. Beech trees were plenty along the western border of the blowndown with yellow leaves still rustling in the chilly wind. A few red squirrels were also alive to their winter needs, and to the boys, paw-

ing among dry leaves, it all seemed like the old farm again. Nuts in fair amount were easily gathered. By noon a peck was secured, and after dinner two extra big trees were found and a full bushel added to their store.

The next morning proved the predictions of Old Renus to be true, for it grew warmer in spite of a gray, cloudy sky. "We'd better take up the snares the fust thing arter breakfast," he advised, "'n' then go fer nuts ag'in over 'longside the bottom. I noticed quite a few beech trees 'long the west side 'n' ez it's warmer we'll take the fixin's with us 'n' cook dinner in the woods."

The start was made early with four blankets to rig as a protection at noon, and the needful cooking utensils. The snares were first picked up, a cluster of beech trees located a mile beyond, and while the boys began nut gathering again, Old Renus prepared an enjoyable outdoor meal. In fact, he had only proposed the trip to give the boys a pleasant day's outing. He knew they had an ample store of nuts.

His preparations for this outing dinner, with a chilly north wind sweeping along this low mountain range in fitful blasts, were as usual with him. A nook at the southern base of a protruding ledge was selected and the undergrowth cleared away. A rude stone fireplace was set up in front of this

ledge, and with two blankets tied up for wind shields and two to sit upon, his cozy corner nook was now ready. Then after a look at the busy boys, he cruised around prospecting once more. He followed a bush-choked ravine up the mountain slope, crossing and recrossing it on watch for signs of coal. He turned north from this along the border of the bottom land to a point almost opposite where he had found his ore, and here a shallow defile led up into the range. This he pursued some fifty rods to find that it dipped again and he saw below him a crater-like depression filled with a tangle of large and small boulders and dense growing scrub spruce. "Nice place fer an old lynx to hev a hole," he muttered crawling down into it quite unafraid. "Hope I won't hev to waste a shell on one."

Midway of this somber tangle of moss-coated rocks, with the wind moaning over the green clad ledge above, he came upon a chunk of his gray-black ore, moss-coated on one side only!

It was unmistakable, a bushel-sized piece of silver-lead ore, and pawing amid the moss and rotting mould beside it, he found plenty of smaller pieces.

"I ain't s'prised a mite," he muttered. "In fact, I 'spected this. That gully cross the bottom trends no' east 'n' so does the hollow I came up." He

next crossed this gap in the range to its southern side to find more ore. He turned east again towards the lake bottom, and once out of this somber hollow, faced around to peer into it again.

Right across it and stretched upon a big limp, was a yellow-eyed lynx, watching him!

It was an easy and most tempting shot. The mottled animal fully three feet long, lay motionless not over six rods away. Old Renus knew he could almost hit one of those big glaring eyes, and much was he tempted to shoot.

"No, tain't wuth it," he said finally, turning away with the rifle still under his arm. "I hain't got but fourteen shells 'n' we're goin' to need 'em all 'fore spring."

He returned to the lake shore, to note that this defile lay almost exactly southwest of his silver lode and then he strode on to where the boys were. The discovery of the ore was of scant interest to him, for what he did want to find was hard coal.

The dinner of broiled venison was what might be expected from his ability as a cook, and the sun, too, almost penetrated the gray clouds to add comfort and cheer. A lazy siesta was taken by him later, while the boys went nutting again, and, when homeward bound, a good half bushel more of the small triangular nuts had been se-

cured. But it was their last day's outing, for when the boys peeped out of their cabin the next morning, the air was full of white flakes; the pond was invisible, and fully six inches of snow had fallen.

The long-dreaded winter had come!

It snowed all that day, a warm moist fall that bent the white birches and lay thick upon the spruce boughs. That evening it grew colder. The steadily falling snow began to drift and when a cold bright day dawned, a foot or more of snow hid everything, and a deep drift led away from one corner of the cabin.

"Wal, it's shovel 'n' dig paths today, boys," Old Renus announced cheerfully, starting a fire within the cabin. "'N' the fust one to the pond for water. We ain't got to hurry no more," he added, smilingly. "'N' I'm mighty glad o' one thing. This fust snow fallin' damp 'll freeze 'n' coat our roof so we'll be warmer 'n toast in here any time." An optimistic prediction, of course, and akin to extracting sunshine from cucumbers, but that was Old Renus' way.

He led the way in this work after breakfast, and by mid-forenoon the interior of their barricade had been cleared of snow and swept out with brush brooms. A ten-foot wide space in front was shoveled away, also a wide path down to the lake; and

then Old Renus called a halt while he looked around and considered.

"Do ye know, boys, what I think we best do?" he asked. "Well, it's just this. In the fust place, now that snow's come we may hev a call from a wolf or two some mornin' 'n' we may not o' course. But ez we hev traps 'n' time 'n' bait thar's all o' the mink, cat 'n' otter carcasses I've got hid under the slate jest for this purpose—'n' knowin' how wolves sneak 'round a cabin at fust in kinder circles, workin' nearer on the lookout, why I cal'late we best dig a three-foot wide path 'bout thirty feet out from the cabin 'n' round to the ledge on either side. We'll line it on the inside with a layer o' spruce boughs. Plant four o' the logs we've got under snow crossways 'n' set 'n' bait our big traps two on either side o' whar our path out, crosses this one. My cal'latin' 'll be that if a wolf should come round we'll be woke up some mornin' by him yippin' with a foot in a trap. 'N' it'll be consolin' music to all on us. We'll show the fust comer what we think o' wolves in general. Mebbe we best set the little traps, too. They won't hold a wolf ten minutes, but they'll worry him some." And so delighted were the boys over this possible outcome that they set about the work with a will. The path was dug as planned, and the entire fourteen traps properly

set and baited, two small ones being fastened to one log with one bait over them, and the big ones placed for solitary duty.

"Now we're ready fer our howlin' friends," Old Renus asserted after spreading moss lightly over each trap. "'N' we've got suthin' to anticipate likewise." He was treating the matter lightly, of course, but he knew that the arrival of wolves meant serious danger, and that they might be kept prisoners for weeks at a time. He felt secure in this stone cabin, however, but not positive that starving wolves would not leap over the barricade. If any did, his rifle would be the last resort. He knew that sooner or later wolves would appear. It might not be for a week, a month, or even more. But come they would some day.

He had not heard one howl for two nights now, though he was always alert. He listened as usual this evening, meanwhile sewing four wildcat skins together for a bedspread, while Orlo and Jim played checkers on a box cover properly marked by him, with squares of slate of two colors for checkers; thus this homelike evening passed with no sound from outside except an occasional crack of ice from the pond. Then while all three boys were intent on their game, suddenly, from close by, came the loud snarling howl Old Renus had expected! Another in quick response from over

on the lake bottom answered, and stopped the checker game on the instant.

"Don't mind 'em, boys," Old Renus smiled reassuringly. "We're ready fer 'em 'n' traps all waitin'. We may hev some good fun by mornin'."

Five, ten minutes passed while the boys listened and Old Renus sewed. Then again, from close by came a yelping bark!

CHAPTER XIX

WHEN Jim went to the pond for water the next morning, he found the tracks of two wolves crossing the paths twice, once near the pond and again nearer the cabin. He chopped the hole out hurriedly, filled his pail and scampered back as fast as if a wolf were after him. Then Old Renus grasped his rifle, and followed by the boys, began an investigation. He soon found that the tracks came from the lake bottom, continued to where he had hidden the mink carcasses under the slate, and back again whence they came. Also that the wolves had pawed the heavy, slate slabs away from his bait and evidently obtained a good meal.

"It's one on me," he said almost sternly, looking at the mess of half eaten carcasses still left in a rock depression beside the ledge. "Thar war two o' the brutes, a he 'n' she most likely. They come from over the bottom. Smelt my hidden bait 'n' made a bee line for it. They stuffed up

full, had a reg'lar feast 'n' hiked 'thout comin' near the cabin. But we've got 'em, boys, now, dead sure," he added grimly. "They'll be back tonight or 'arly in the mornin' fer more feed sure's a gun. 'N' they'll git it, too—in the legs! We're jest ez sure o' havin' fun with them varmits ez the sun is o' risin'." And so positive of this was he, and so anxious, that he did not stop for breakfast until all the carcasses, now frozen stiff, were carried to the cabin, the remnants covered by slate in the shallow hole, and the four big traps with logs attached, set and properly hidden where they would do business.

"Now we'll go 'n' git breakfast," he directed, sweeping snow over their own tracks as they retreated. "Those cusses stole a march on me like I war a farmer that never seen a wolf, but they can't do it twice a-goin'.

"We'll kinder lay low today, boys," he added later, "'n' keep inside most o' the time. That'll gin 'em jest the chance they want, 'n' us too."

"But where are they now?" Orlo asked anxiously, not yet understanding the ways of wolves.

"Wal, jest now, they'r most likely havin' a nap in some hole longside the bottom land," came the confident answer. "That's the way o' most gorged animals. They'll probably git some hungry by noon. Come sneakin' over this way soon arter.

Mebbe watch out in the woods till most dark 'n' back fer 'nother feed by then. They war here 'bout the crack o' day, I jedged by the mess they left. We won't hear a yip 'fore they come either 'n' may not ketch sight on 'em. They war on watch last night, I cal'late. Seen our light o' course 'n' when they come again it'll be to dart out o' the woods nearest the feed spot. They're cunnin' ez Injuns even if they ain't afraid o' man. A fire's the only thing they're skeery on."

Just now the thought of wolves lurking along the forest border to dart out like grim avengers when twilight came, was not assuring to the boys. But they had explicit faith in Old Renus and their stone cabin.

After breakfast he set them to work to whittle and carve paddles with their pocket knives from slabs of pine he had split out and partially shaped with an ax, using one of their own paddles for a model. But this was mainly to take up their minds and pass the time. When noon came he tried making an apple pie for a treat—and a fair success it was—and in the afternoon busied himself whittling, three-inch wide by one-half inch thick, ribs for the canoe which he planned to build. The boys grew uneasy late that afternoon, and piled wood up to stand upon so they could peep over the bar-

ricade and watch for the expected wolves. It was almost down to zero outside the cabin, and a chilly vigil, but so anxious were they and so exciting was the prospect of seeing two huge wolves jump into the big bear traps, they just had to keep watch by turns. Orlo was on watch when the thrilling denouement came and it was so nearly dark that he only saw two gray shadows dart out from the dark forest above the pond and make straight for the baited traps, not ten rods away.

"Here they come," he shouted and the next instant he saw two shadowy creatures, like big gaunt hounds, leap upward, and the air was rent with screeching, blood-curdling snarls.

But dimly could the three excited boys discern this unique wildwood drama, and so thrilling was it that all sprang outside to better see this shadowy fight of two trapped wolves trying to kill each other.

"Go it, ye devils," exclaimed Old Renus, in high glee over his success in trapping. "Keep it up 'n' hev a good time," he added as a louder medley of snarling howls came. "We kin stand it if ye kin. Eat each other up, dern ye 'n' do it quick. Hev a good square meal both on ye while ye're 'bout it. Hooray! How do ye like raw wolf with traps jinglin' fer music? Come snoopin' 'round here agin, will ye?"

Never had the boys even imagined such a deliriously exciting episode.

How long it lasted they never knew, and not until the intermittent snarling finally ceased, and they were numb with cold, did they return to that cheery fire and the protecting cabin which now seemed like Heaven to them.

"We'll git supper 'n' fergit our callers, now they've had their rations," Old Renus chuckled. "I've had some luck in trappin' in my time, but never any quite so consolin' ez this."

But it was a long time before the boys could sleep that night, and they were awake at dawn. No breakfast was thought of until they, with clubs and Old Renus with the rifle, sallied forth to investigate the wolf battle. And it was a "creepy" exhibit of brute nature they now saw, for as Old Renus surmised, these two were male and female; the male had been caught by one hind leg and was barely alive, while his mate had a forefoot in one trap, a hind leg in another and was frozen stiff. Both had torn throats and were covered with blood, while the bait under a slate slab had not been disturbed.

"Nice lovin' pair, wan't they?" Old Renus said, grinning. "But that's the nature o' wolves. Both got ketched in a jiffy 'n' went at killin' each other the next minute 'n' the dog won out."

He rained a shower of blows on the head of the inert wolf with a vigor that proved how he regarded the species, and then the two were dragged back to camp to be skinned later.

"We'll set the traps over ag'in," he said, after this was done, "'n' use one carcass fer bait. If any more come round we'll hev another wolf circus 'n' I'm cal'latin' we'll all in'jy it." He set the traps with more caution this time, clearing the snow away from a small space, hanging the wolf carcass up against the side of the ledge and spreading the traps a little more. To add an extra lure he roasted a mink body brown and hung that up also.

"I jest wanter gin the next pair o' howlers that come suthin' to make their mouths water," he explained, chuckling over his plan. "Suthin' to sorter hurry 'em on to the good time waitin' fer 'em. Kinder show 'em our hospitality, so to speak. I only wish we had more big traps to keer fer a larger party. Howsomever, we'er disposed to be entertainin' ain't we, boys?"

He was not as well satisfied as his facetiousness would seem to indicate, however, for he had once been kept prisoner for over a week in a log cabin by starving wolves, and not until he had shot most of them and witnessed the killed ones devoured, did he venture out. And now he expected a similar siege. He knew that if a band of wolves

came and the traps disposed of two or three, the rest would lay siege to the cabin until they were killed or starvation drove them away. He listened for more wolf howls each evening and early morning, when he knew they usually made themselves heard, and after another light snow fall he cleared the snow away from his traps to be sure they would do their duty. Also, with the boys' help, he shoveled a wide path from the traps to the border of the woods east of the pond, and another to its outlet, and thence back to the ledge again. "Our howlin' friends allus foller a path if they kin," he explained to the boys, " 'n' while no more may call, we want to show 'em whar dinner is waitin' if they do."

But no more wolf howls came out of the grim wilderness for many days after this episode. More snow fell. The paths were cleared. Old Renus kept the boys working leisurely on the canoe frame to give them occupation, but the days passed slowly. With the excitement of camp-building, trapping, fishing and other incidents of wilderness life they had been quite content, and keenly interested withal; but shut in as they were now in a twelve-foot square cabin with the weather too cold for ice fishing, and naught to do but whittle on canoe ribs, eat and sleep, life soon became desperately monotonous. Old Renus had foreseen this. He

had done everything that was possible to keep the boys busy, but he had no power over their minds. He conjured up endless occupations for them, one of which was to widen the wolf path, as he called it, and to bank the snow high on the cabin side like a redoubt. Then they gathered a fringe of spruce boughs and thrust them into the top of this snow wall. The weather grew steadily colder, and the days became shorter until, by Orlo's watch, their only timepiece, the sun set at about four o'clock. Meanwhile, no more ominous wolf calls were heard.

The weather moderated slightly now. A warm day came and then Old Renus hilariously led his doleful boys to the pond to cut through foot-thick ice and set a few lines. They didn't need trout; they had more in the pools than they could eat all winter. But it was some diversion, at least. A cold snap succeeded this warm wave, so keen that fire had to be kept going all night. And that evening sharp reports like distant rifle shots came from the forest.

"It's rocks crackin' away from ledges 'long the range," Old Renus explained. "It's allus that way when it gits thirty or forty below zero ez I cal'late 'tis tonight. Ye see it's the drip o' springs in deep cracks or water-soaked rock that freezes 'n' suthin hez to give way. That's how gullies git filled with

loose boulders. Most are split off by frost. We're like to git a big snow fall arter this."

It came two days later at noon, after a decided rise in the temperature, and never had the boys seen snow fall so thick and fast. It was as if the air was an almost solid body of falling flakes, and by dark the snow lay a foot deep in their enclosure. It continued to fall steadily until sometime towards morning, when Old Renus was wakened by the rising roar of a blizzard.

"The Lord help us if we wan't in a stone cabin with a slate roof just now," he muttered as the bellowing roar increased. Then Orlo, in the bunk below, called up to him.

"Are you awake, Uncle Renus?" he asked.

"Wal, kinder," the old man answered. "But better go to sleep ag'in. 'Tain't mornin' yit."

But the boys were all wide-awake, for the roaring, screaming gale banished slumber. The next thing Old Renus heard was Orlo starting the fire. Then Jim and Levi crawled out from under their bear skin and their old hero joined them.

"Kinder nice to feel we hev a slate roof 'n' stone walls jest now, ain't it, boys?" he said cheerily, as the flames brightened. "What time is it, Orlo?"

"Just four o'clock," Orlo answered, consulting his "Waterbury." "And I'm hungry."

"Good sign, fust rate," came the smiling re-

joinder. "'N' when ye feel so it's time to eat. I'm willin' myself."

And so it came to pass that those four castaways now ensconced in a rude stone hut in a Canadian wilderness, broiled partridges, fried bear ham and made coffee with daylight full four hours away, and fully enjoyed the feast.

"We'er prisoners here now," Old Renus announced. "But we're a million times better off 'n' we war up in that balloon. Time is goin' to go slow with us, but we've got to grin 'n' bear it. We're safe here 'n' goin' to keep warm 'n' grow fat. 'N' thar's a billion people in this world wuss off 'n' we are. When ye git blue think o' that. You've got over a thousand dollars wuth o' furs to take out in the spring likewise fer pocket money, so keep cheerful 'thout ye want to make me blue."

While this was the first, it was not the last time he had to count their blessings for them.

CHAPTER XX

AFTER Old Renus and the boys had disposed of that unique repast, the cheery flames, the warm cabin and the sense of security, combined with the dull roar of the gale, soon made them drowsy, and glad to crawl into their bunks again. It was long after daylight before they woke to find full four feet of snow within their barricade and a drift as high as the hut leading away from it. Old Boreas was still raging and roaring, and the air was white with driven snow. Great wreaths and blasts of it came leaping over the ledge top to be torn and swept along in the wind. Naught was visible except this white scurry of dense snowflakes sweeping across the open space; not even the spruce forest that creaked and groaned in the whistling gale. To go outside their sapling wall was impossible. Orlo waded waist-deep inside, to get supplies from the stone shed. Water for coffee had to be made from melted snow. Their one window hole, over which Old

Renus had fastened a bit of silk, admitted a little light and more snow. The slate and sapling door had to be calked with rice straw and most of their light came from the fire and one candle. But for all that no one grumbled or felt alarmed.

"Let 'er blow 'n' howl 'n' pelt, who cares?" Old Renus declared cheerfully. "This stone shack is here to stay put 'n' 'twill, too. 'N' we kin hev four meals a day. Keep it up dern ye," he added as a louder bellow came. "No wind kin skeer us, kin it, boys?"

The blizzard continued all day and far into the next night.

The boys had seen old-fashioned snow storms that covered Oakham two feet deep and filled every cut in the highways level full, but nothing to compare with this, for when the sun once more smiled down into that wilderness nook, over six feet of snow hid the outlines of the pond shore, while the ledge back of them had practically vanished. They shoveled a narrow path to the pond first, then cleared out their dooryard. It now occurred to Old Renus that if a slight rain came and a snow crust formed, nothing could prevent a band of hungry wolves from leaping into their yard.

"We got to head that off right away," he declared to the boys, and to work they went, using their silk cover-lids to carry the "pesky stuff" out

to a wind swept spot near the pond. And an all day's job it was. The half-circle path to the traps was then dug out, with the open space around them, and after fully three days of steady work he once more had his guiding path ready with a ten-foot high snow barrier along the cabin side.

"Now dern ye, come on 'n' eat, drink 'n' dance in steel traps 'n' hev a good time," he said to himself, looking their redoubt over. "Ye may worry us some but ye can't git at us."

And that evening, as if to answer his defiance, and for the first time since the two wolves met their fate, he heard an ominous howl, and within an hour a full chorus echoed from the lake bottom.

It was to be a wolf evening he was sure. It was crisp and cold with a bright new moon. He knew that most of their roving was done on moonlit nights, and that if a crust should form now, they would soon appear. The boys were much alarmed.

"Oh, they'll show up most likely," the old man admitted, in answer to Levi's anxious question. "Mebbe not till a crust comes. But don't git skeered 'n' worry, boys; we're ready fer 'em. In the mornin' we'll dig out the small traps 'n' scatter 'em 'long the new path to bother the devils."

Morning brought a south wind, and later, rain, both of which lowered the snow to about four feet,

and the next afternoon a misty fog followed. "We're goin' to git a snow crust by mornin'," Old Renus declared when the wind shifted at sunset, and at once set about readjusting the traps. That evening, as if their nimble enemies knew that the forest would soon become a smooth road for them, they began their calls to one another. They seemed to be all about and a faint howl from west of the lake would be answered by a louder one nearer by.

"They're gittin' ready fer the warpath," came a little anxiously from Renus, as a sharp yelp from the blowdown brought a prolonged howl from the lake bottom. "The moose 'n' deer allus yard up after a heavy snowfall 'n' then is when the wolves band together. 'N' they'll stick together all winter 'n' hang around one o' those yards.

"We're safe ez we kin be, boys," he added later, beginning to cook supper. "So don't git narvous. We may be shut up a week or two ez I said, but no wolves kin git at us here." And yet the boys were scared, for that old trapper's fate had been an object lesson, and to hear—as they now did—those weird, snarling howls from all about, was ominous. They had faith in Old Renus and their stone hut, and yet to feel that a score of those fierce, white-fanged brutes were laying siege to

them, was fearsome. They had read that Siberian wolf packs would not only pursue sledges for hours to overtake and tear the occupants to pieces, but would fight and claw their way into cabins, too. And now those same savage brutes were gathering about their cabin! It is needless to say they slept little that night in spite of the assurances of Old Renus.

The next morning, Orlo and Jim with the ax and two small pails, hastened to the lake to get water. They glanced hurriedly around the bordering forest, chopped the water hole open, filled the pails and happening to look across to the woods again, saw two gray wolves darting out of the forest towards them.

The speed they made back to the cabin would have done credit to a base runner!

It was a close call, for their two pursuers were not five rods away when they dashed through the barricade gate shouting, "The wolves are coming; get the rifle, quick!" A succession of snarling barks came as the two brutes halted a few rods from the cabin, then a howl came from one, and when Old Renus looked out he saw six more just appearing from the bordering forest.

What he had so long feared had come. They were surrounded by a pack of hungry wolves and were prisoners.

"Don't be skeered, boys," he said assuringly. "They won't try to jump our barricade anyhow so we kin laugh at 'em."

But there were no smiles on the boys' faces, for, as they peeped through the fringe of birch poles above their barricade, they all saw a group of ten wolves a few rods away watching the cabin and more appearing from the dark woods. This so terrorized the boys that they shook with fear and never thought of breakfast. A concerted howl next came from the wolf pack, now grouped together. A weird, long-drawn one, bloodcurdling in its ferocity, that echoed across the open space in the wilderness.

"There'll be suthin doin' 'fore long," Old Renus asserted grimly, watching this gray group of wolves, so near that the red pupils of their vicious eyes were visible. "They're kinder stumped by the cabin 'n' smoke risin' out, but soon they'll smell our bait 'n' rush for't 'n' then it'll be our turn to laugh."

This soon happened, for after two more concerted howls, first one wolf raised his head and sniffed, another did the same, then the pack, as if by one impulse, darted to the carcass hanging against the ledge and the waiting traps.

So tense was this crucial moment that the boys' hearts almost stopped beating.

It was a drama of wild brute life and death few ever witness, for in an instant the foremost wolf, with his paw in a trap, leaped up with a snarling howl, a second and third met the same fate and the next moment four pairs of eyes not ten rods away saw a group of white-fanged wolves biting, snarling and tearing at the throats of the three who fought back as only trapped wolves will; a confusion of lanky gray bodies and barking snarls, terrible in their vicious intensity. Two then sprang for the hanging carcass; three more leaped forward to fight for their share of that, snapping at one another in the mêlée. Moans and snarls of pain came from the trapped ones, being bitten and torn by sharp teeth. First one, then another and finally a third wolf darted out of the woods to join in the mad combat. A howling, leaping, snarling medley of gray bodies leaping and tearing at one another.

Over all the morning sun shone fair and bright, and the snow sparkled.

"Nice social time they're havin'," Old Renus chuckled. "Go it ye devils," he added, as a prolonged howl came from one with the fangs of another deep in his throat. "Keep it up 'n' inj'y yerselves," he shouted hilariously. "Eat 'n' be merry while it lasts! Ye don't git hot wolf served in traps more'n once in a lifetime 'n' so fill up.

If I had shells to spare, I'd help ye to another course o' raw wolf." For a half-hour those four, thrilled through and through, watched that death banquet. It came to an end finally and one by one the blood-stained wolves sneaked away into the dark forest.

"Can you set the traps over again?" Orlo asked anxiously, when the last wolf vanished.

"Wal, I want to," Old Renus answered eagerly. "But it's purty risky to do it now. It'll hev to be done now or never though, while them devils hev had a feed. I believe I'll chance it," he added, entering the cabin. "It's our white alley, these traps are. Ye boys watch sharp while I'm settin' the traps 'n' yell the moment ye spy a wolf in sight."

"Shan't I go too, Uncle Renus, to hold the gun?" Orlo asked.

"No need; ye can't help," answered Old Renus, picking up the rifle. "The traps are 'bout midway to the woods from here, 'n' if a wolf shows up, I think I kin make it." Then with rifle in hand this brave old woodsman left the cabin on what was a decidedly risky errand.

He found a gory exhibit; the bones of three wolves in four traps, half-hidden by blood-stained snow, a gruesome and disgusting disclosure of animal carnage. He set the four traps hastily, keeping one eye on the nearby woods. He tossed the

gnawed skeletons in a pile at the foot of the ledge. He waded to where he had the bait hidden and dug some out, and, ready for more wolves, he returned to the cabin with bloody hands.

"We'll git some water now," he next directed, "'n' hev breakfast. And it seemed about time for it, as it was almost noon.

The wolf siege that Old Renus had feared was now on and well he knew it. He also knew that the ten or twelve that had escaped the traps would lurk around their cabin with blood-whetted appetites for weeks, probably. A few might be caught in the traps, to be speedily devoured, but more would come to take their places, and knowing their habits as he did, he knew that they, with vultures and crows, possessed an instinct to gather from afar where food had been found, to share it; and that until starved away or some one of these wild rangers signaled that a moose or deer yard had been found, they would hang around the camp with its scent of meat and cooking, a continual menace day and night.

He had kept this danger and knowledge from the boys as long as he could, but now it was upon them, and must be met.

"We got to keep shut up, boys, fer no tellin' how long," he explained, cooking a late breakfast. "'N' the wust on't is we can't tell when wolves are

hidin' round in the woods waitin' to dart out or when they hev gone fer good. They've got scent o' us 'n' our meat. 'N' in a way they're like crows. They'll pass the word on by some sort o' howl 'n' we may hev two-dozen or more hangin' round. We kin dodge out 'n' set the traps over, 'n' hev a little fun hearin' or seein' the ketched ones eat up. We kin sneak down to the pond fer water, but that's all fer a spell. If I had shells nuff I'd soon pick the pack off one at a time but I hain't."

"They can't git into our cabin, can they?" Jim queried anxiously, "or over the barricade?"

"Not into the cabin," came the firm answer, "'n' I feel middlin' safe 'bout our barricade. It's in case one should I've been savin' the shells. One might jump over 'n' then I'd hev to shoot him."

The boys built a higher platform of wood so they could better look out over the barricade and often watched for their enemies. A few were seen near the woods that afternoon, and towards nightfall the intermittent barking and weird howling began. Two or three ventured close to the cabin, and just after sunset a chorus of howls and snarling barks announced that the traps had once more done their duty. A pandemonium of wolf cries and sharp snarls ensued, and, watching eagerly, the boys could faintly discern a group of wolves fighting madly in a confused heap.

"They'r havin' 'nother lively supper," Old Renus announced cheerfully, now cooking their own. "'N' that's what suits us, boys, don't it? If we kin keep our traps set between times, we may thin the devils out some. We needn't worry anyhow. We're safe here." But it was a kind of safety decidedly nerve-racking to the boys. How many wolves were now lurking about they knew not, but there were enough to keep them in continual fear, for, watching out with the new moon faintly lighting the open space, half a dozen could be seen squatting in the path between pond and cabin. An occasional howl came from the dark woods to add weird interest to that long evening, and sleep came fitfully, dominated by wolves.

None were visible when morning dawned, however, and after a careful scrutiny of the bordering woods, Old Renus decided that he and Orlo might venture out to get water.

"I dunno what to do 'bout the traps," he admitted later. "To set 'em means ketchin' one or two o' the cusses 'n' givin' the rest a meal, 'n' they'll never go away till they're starved away. Mebbe we best wait a day or two 'n' see how they act. Thar's no tellin' what wolves will do. It's hard to git a line on 'em."

"Are they watching us from the woods all the time now?" Orlo asked anxiously.

"Wal, mebbe, one or two," dubiously. "Ez I said wolves act curi's. They call one 'nother. They run in packs. They vanish 'thout a yip mebbe fer a day or two 'n' the next ye know out o' the woods they come like ghosts. It's this onsartin way that keeps me guessin'."

For a week the inmates of Camp Castaway were kept prisoners and while each evening a few distant howls came from far away, not a wolf was seen. The traps were set and baited properly again, and twice a day Old Renus and Orlo made a hasty trip to the pond. A few inches of snow fell and the next morning Old Renus was awakened by a peculiar scratching and growling and peeped out just in time to see a wolf draw himself up onto the barricade and glare down at him with red-rimmed eyes.

CHAPTER XXI

FOR one instant Old Renus glanced at that gray shaggy-haired animal, glaring down at him, then he wheeled, and grasping his rifle, sent a bullet through its head.

But the effect of this episode upon the boys was almost pitiful. Their faith in the barricade was rudely shaken and naturally they were much alarmed.

"He meant to steal a march on us," Old Renus told them, leading the way outside, rifle in hand. "But we wan't caught nappin'. He climbed up on the frozen snow," he added, while they all stared at the dead wolf lying at the foot of the drift sloping away from the barricade, "but the poles halted him. Probably smelt our meat 'n' took a chance to git at it that way. We'll head off any more 'arly comers." He looked all around the open but no wolves were visible.

"I'd orter thought o' that drift," Old Renus admitted. "But it's time 'nuff now. Arter breakfast

we'll go at it." They did so, cutting away big chunks of the frozen snow from near the barrier until a ten foot space all around had been cleared. The old man also examined the poles stuck in this to find them held firmly in place by the frozen snow, which reassured the boys considerably. "No need to worry a mite," he said to them after this. "While a wolf might jump up top o' our wall, none are likely too. 'N' if one did the poles ud stop him. All our danger is in gettin' caught 'way from the cabin. My notion is that the pack hev got track o' a moose or deer yard 'n' gone off for a spell. Or mebbe the trapped ones they eat up kinder acted ez a warnin'. Guess we better set the traps over agin." And set them he did, after half-skinning the wolf he had just shot, for bait.

But the elusive wolves had vanished as mysteriously as they came. No howls quavered through the wilderness that night or the next, and although they kept close within their barricade for a few days, this confinement seemed needless and life at Camp Castaway resumed its winter monotony. A lynx smelt out the bait one night and was caught in two traps, but was not discovered until a few days later, when Old Renus chanced to visit them after a snowfall. The path to the pond and to the traps was kept clear. Also the space around the cabin. When the boys felt trout hungry, they

made a visit to the pools and work on the canoe frame kept up in a desultory manner. A sharp, cold spell came at intervals, accompanied by rock-splitting reports from the mountains, and for weeks Old Renus heard but one far-distant wolf howl. The days began to grow perceptibly longer, the canoe frame was finished and, lacking work to do, the boys grew uneasy and disconsolate. So far they had borne their imprisonment with fair cheerfulness, sleeping late each morning, working on the canoe frame, cooking and eating bountiful meals, and playing checkers in the evenings or listening to the stories and adventures of Old Renus.

But strange to say, not a single wolf howl had been heard for a month.

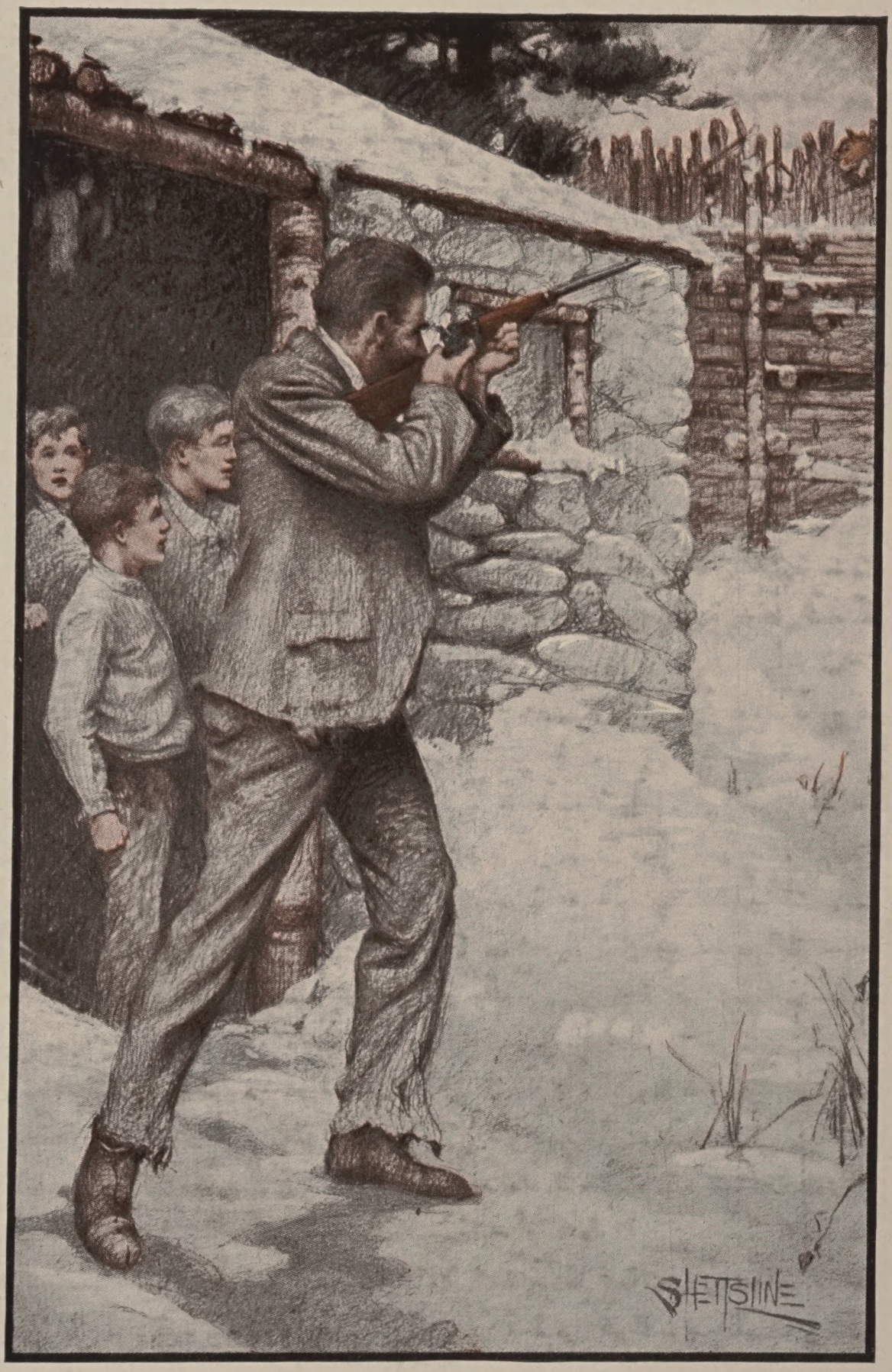
"Some one on 'em found a deer yard," he explained to the boys one evening, "'n' called our bunch to it. That's why they left so suddenly. Deer allus yard up arter a heavy snow fall ez we had then. That is, a few on 'em, mebbe jest a pair find an open spot in a swamp whar sedge grass grows thick. Here they toss the snow away with their horns to git the dry grass 'n' keep at it till they 'ev made a yard to lay down in nights. They call to one another too, till mebbe a dozen or more come. When wolves show up the bucks fight 'em off with their antlers 'n' kill some too. They'll

fight lynx the same way. I once found a yard with over two dozen in it. When wolves come the bucks stand outside to fight the wolves with the does back on 'em. 'N' a buck with a good set o' antlers kin kill a wolf quite handy. O' course a deer or two growin' hungry will work out o' the yard to dig 'n' find dry grass 'n' leaves 'n' their feet go through the crust, they can't run 'n' then the wolves kill 'em quick. 'N' that's what keeps a pack hangin' round a yard, arter a deep crusted snow has held the deer in fer weeks." And such was the explanation and probable reason why Camp Castaway had so long been deserted by wolves.

Time dragged slowly for the boys and they began to grow homesick in spite of all Old Renus could say or do. He made work for them to pass the time; had them shovel a wide path from the woods east of the pond to the wolf traps; another well away and around the cabin to the same spot; still another up to the trout pools, and then they widened the space about the cabin to make a ten-foot high snow wall. And finally when a warm day came, they dug a path across the lake, cut holes and went to fishing.

But the old woodsman kept ever on the watch for wolves.

He knew they would appear again and without one howl of warning. Probably just at night or



"He wheeled, and grasping his rifle, sent a bullet through its head"

early morning a pair or perhaps a dozen would dart out of the dark woods, and woe to him or the boys if they were caught unawares.

He tried to determine by the moon's return how much of the winter had passed, and when its first crescent showed in the west, he decided it must be the last of February. But his hardest task was to keep the boys in good spirits.

"We jest got to keep cheerful 'n' wait fer spring," he said to them one evening when homesickness made them so glum that neither checkers nor stories interested them. "If ye had a jail term to serve, ye'd jest hev to grin 'n' bear it anyway. Now look at this the same way. We're here 'n' can't git away. But we hev a lot o' comforts all the time. 'Nuff to eat 'n' good stuff. Warm beds 'n' wood to keep fire goin'. It's well long towards spring, the last o' February, I cal'late, 'n' in a few weeks more, we kin begin building a new canoe. 'N' think o' the fun we'll hev paddlin' out all the way downstream, just shootin' long with the current 'n' campin' when night comes. We'll make a tent outen our silk quilts. We'll sell our furs fer all o' a thousand dollars, buy some bang-up clothes 'n' hev a sight seein' trip goin' home. 'N' won't we s'prise the folks when we git to Oakham? 'N' won't ye boys hev some stories to tell wuth hearin'? 'N' a lot o' money to put in the bank too."

And thus did Old Renus try to cheer up the homesick boys.

A week later came a warm south wind with rain and fog, that cut the snow away to less than a foot deep in the woods, and filled the pond so an impassable stream coursed down into the big lake. A cold wave followed that turned the soggy snow into almost solid ice and then a light snow came after. Old Renus reset his traps, for, knowing what this thaw meant in the woods, he felt sure the wolves would soon reappear. He measured their peculiar roving habits aright, for that evening for the first time in a month, their uncanny barking howls were heard again. But this time they came from north beyond the blowdown, and finally from close by the pond.

"Our friends are plannin' 'nother call on us, boys," he admitted cheerfully, "but the traps are ready 'n' we too. It's curi's how the varmints can't learn anything, ain't it? We ketched seven in the traps already to be eat up by the rest 'n' yit back they come fer more o' that fun. No other critters ud be sich fools."

He, with all the boys this time, stepped outside the barricade to look around before turning in. The moon, now in its last quarter, was just rising over the mountains; its mild beams glinted on the smooth ice in the pond and on the ice-coated rocks,

and a wolf call close by in the blowdown was answered by one far away, yet clear and distinct in the still air.

And on returning, Old Renus, the last in and with his mind on his traps, failed to fasten the door of the barricade!

He slept fitfully that night, expecting as he did a visit from wolves by early dawn and was awakened then by a snarling growl close to the cabin door. He arose instantly fully clothed, opened the cabin door and stepped out.

The next moment with a sharp growl a wolf leaped upon him!

He grasped the brute by the throat with both hands, yelled "git my knife out quick, Orlo 'n' stab him," as the boys jumped out of bed. Quick to act, Orlo drew the hunting knife from the belt of Old Renus and stabbed the struggling brute again and again. It was quick action, but the sharp blade reached a vital point, and soon Old Renus, blood covered, felt the struggling animal grow limp in his hands.

"Git my rifle quick," he shouted, throwing the wolf away from him, and the next instant he had shot a second one ten feet away.

"Wal, 'twas a close call," Old Renus admitted, glancing at the two dead wolves and the quarter of venison they had been feeding upon, also at the

open door of the barricade. "Closer 'n' I like," he added, looking at his bloody hands. And he was a gory object; covered with blood from the stabs Orlo had given the struggling wolf. "It's on me," he continued, now bolting the open door. "I must 'a' left the door open 'n' the devils got in." And just then as if to add to the thrilling episode, a chorus of snarling howls came from the traps.

"Hooray, they're at it ag'in," he shouted, recovering himself a little and never before were the howls of trapped wolves more welcome to human ears.

The boys were like limp rags in their fright. It had all come upon them so suddenly, Orlo being the only one awake when Old Renus shouted for help. It seemed like a horrible nightmare.

"We're safe, so cheer up," Old Renus assured the trembling boys, while he wiped his bloody hands. "'N' now let's take a peek 'n' see the fun."

Fun it was to him, to see, in the dim morning light, two trapped wolves fighting for life against a dozen gray brutes, tearing at one another's throats amid the howling confusion. The snarling and fighting kept on for half an hour; the free beasts devouring the helpless ones; a cannibal orgy possible only to hungry wolves and to no other animals. It was all over when the sun rose and smiled down on that nook in the wilderness,

for then the brutes, fierce and vile among all others, slunk away into the shadowy forest.

And never was sunshine more welcome to Old Renus and the scared boys than at this moment. The invasion of their barricade; Old Renus grasping a white-fanged wolf by its throat, while Orlo stabbed it, the quick shot at another; all this had so unnerved the three boys, that they still trembled though the danger had passed. Orlo felt himself to be quite a hero, as well he might. For a boy of fourteen, his conduct was heroic. Old Renus was also a good deal upset, and not until the startling incident had been fully discussed, did any one think of breakfast.

"Wolves are the most ornery varmints ever created 'n' the most dangerous," said the old trapper, when calmness was restored and breakfast cooking. "'N' the pizin thing is they are so sly. A lynx or bobcat crouches when he spies ye 'n' not one in a hundred ever jumps on a man, less he's cornered. A b'ar runs away. 'N' ye know 'bout whar to find all on 'em. But a wolf's wuss'n a ghost. Whar they go nobody knows or when they come either. All ye do know is that they dart like a shadder out o' the woods. 'N' they ain't 'fraid o' no livin' thing."

"But will they come tonight or ever again?" Jim asked anxiously.

"No tellin'; I can't even guess," Old Renus answered, shaking his head. "One thing I do know and that is, if they do come they'll find our traps waitin' 'n' our front door bolted. Wolves can't ketch me twice runnin'."

For a week, however, fear kept the four castaways almost prisoners. Old Renus and Orlo fetched water twice daily, and occasionally at midday, went to the trout pools, the old man always carrying the rifle. Each evening they listened for the now familiar howls. But none were heard. The ghostly brutes had vanished as mysteriously as they had appeared.

The days were growing so much longer and warmer that they seemed almost springlike and they had no more intensely cold spells. The light snow that now fell soon melted. The brook out of the pond, full to its brim, kept up a cheerful chatter and seemed to promise a near escape from this grim, vast wilderness. The fear of wolves also slowly vanished, and while Old Renus never let the boys go after water alone and always carried his rifle the precautions were needless. He left the boys one day, to take a look at the lake bottom for an object ever in mind, but was astonished to find it an actual lake, shallow as it appeared from the many iced-over patches, but a vast expanse of white-capped water.

"'Twon't run off 'fore we leave, either," he said, scanning it. "But I kin foller the range 'long the west side. I still think thar's a vein o' coal thar 'n' I've jest got to find it. I believe, too, there is real silver ore here, and I've got to know 'fore I go away."

CHAPTER XXII

ALTHOUGH Old Renus had only the moon's phases by which to determine the lapse of time, when the ice had all melted from in front of their cabin, he began his canoe building, using the old one as a model. It was a slow process, for only a few ribs at a time could be soaked in hot water to bend them into the requisite curve, and when so curled were held in shape by deerskin thongs. Those ribs also had to be graded into lengths equal to the beam of a twenty-foot canoe, and a few bow and stern ribs mortised into the short curved keels. By using the snares, he had enough wire to lash the double gunwales together, holding the ribs in position; and deerskin thongs with which to fasten the thwarts. With all the parts assembled and ready to be put together, it occurred to Old Renus, who in his time had built two birch canoes, that considering the load they must carry, fully a thousand pounds, his silk, balloon cover must be reinforced by bark, else the

least tap against a rock would stave a hole in the frail craft. Therefore, his next move was to hunt for a smooth, yellow birch to cut and peel. He had noticed a few suitable ones along the west side of the lake bottom and the next morning with the rifle and both axes they all set out to find a tree large enough. Those he had in mind were beyond the shallow ravine where he found the seam of coal, and crossing that, Old Renus, always on watch for everything, made an astonishing discovery.

The winter's intense cold had split the moss-coated rock away from the ledge, and a six-inch vein of coal lay exposed!

So astounded and overjoyed was the old woodsman that only his habitual caution and reserve kept him from shouting!

His delight was reasonable, for before him lay the means to solve the riddle that had so long vexed him. A fabulous fortune or a heart rending disappointment.

He made no sign, however, being a firmly-poised and self-controlled man, but merely glancing at the evidence of the marvelous power of intense cold to thus split away a rock of many tons in weight, he kept on to find his birch tree. He found it; cut and peeled it, and they were all back to camp by noon. But so excited and anxious was Old Renus that he

could no longer continue work on the canoe until he had solved the momentous problem.

"We got to hev a lot o' pitch to use in our double canoe,' 'he explained to the boys after dinner, "'n' I'm goin 'to leave ye to keep camp while I go after it. Ye kin unravel a lot o' the balloon net. We got to make a long painter to tow the canoe, or to let it down the rapids." And taking his rifle, and camp ax, he left camp hurriedly and within half an hour he was back at the coal seam.

A bed of ice still lay along the south side of this ravine. The shallow lake shore had to be followed, going and returning. He knew his bed of blue clay was frozen hard, and that all he could do for weeks yet was to dig out coal, carry it to where he had set up his slate crucible, and later, when spring had unlocked his clay bed, steal away from the boys, and with the bellows he had made that winter while they were intent on checker playing, solve the riddle if possible. So he worked at the coal, and by supper time returned to camp with an ample supply of spruce gum.

The boys were so keyed up with the canoe building and the prospect of a near escape from the wilderness, they could scarcely sleep and Old Renus had to curb their spirits. "We got to be patient, boys," he said that evening. "We kin be

ready and start soon ez the ice is out o' the lake o' course, but 'tain't best to. The woods 'll be full o' ice, 'n' campin' 'n' sleepin' on boughs is pretty chilly. If we got to go north, we're like to strike a froze-over lake 'n' git hung up mebbe a week or two. So 'tain't best to leave a warm camp too soon."

Old Renus was far more desirous of warm weather than the boys, though for quite another reason. He went about the canoe building the next morning, however, in his usual careful and thorough manner, first fitting his inner bark shell to the ribs up to what would be about the water line, and adding a double thickness of end sections. These were partially cemented together with plenty of melted pitch, until he had the outlines of a canoe half covered with stout bark. He next lashed the thwarts in place; spread a coat of melted pitch over the bark shell, and finally laid his skeleton craft into a long section of the balloon to draw its edges up and hold them in place by the outer half of the double gunwale. This in turn he fastened to the inner one by a few tempered and clinched nails, and finally lashed it with fine wire. A few minor additions; end seats of deerskin; closed lockers under them; a long painter to use when needed, and the canoe was finished. Properly handled the canoe can be steered down wildly leap-

ing rapids; it will ride safely over huge waves, and yet it is the frailest and most graceful craft that floats. And this one, a hunting and Barlow knife creation, was the sole and only means of escape for these castaways, out of a vast and unknown wilderness.

Only an Old Renus could have built it!

To the boys it seemed a marvel of wildwood beauty and they felt like dancing around it like happy Indians, and looked forward to the trip out as the most joyful excursion possible to take. To its builder, while he was satisfied with his handwork, that trip was one fraught with countless dangers that would tax his every thought to avoid; many hundred miles downstream with hidden rocks waiting to stave holes in his little bark; with insidious currents to catch him unawares and sweep them all to death in a leaping cataract. A blind journey, down a wild, rock-studded, unknown stream!

But it was their sole means of escape.

By the time the canoe was given its final coat of pitch, and turned over, that the pitch might harden in the sun, the ice had all vanished from the open space around their pond. A rim of blue water enclosed its soggy ice cover. The brook above was a rushing, shouting stream, and a few days later, Old Renus excused himself from the boys one

morning by a plea that he wanted to look round a little jest to see what he could see.

He made a bee line for his bed of blue clay up in the blowdown to dig out a goodly lump, and thence on to his rude crucible in the ravine near where he had started a coal pit.

Here lay the little pile of hard coal he had brought three weeks before, and which was the sole and only hope of solving the secret of his black and gray ore. So momentous was this experiment, so much did it mean to him, that his hands trembled as he began the work. He set up his little slabs of slate, placed stones about them to hold them firmly in place; plastered the chinks with clay; laid a shallow bed of charcoal covered with hard coal inside; put two pieces of the ore on this, and over them placed a slab of slate. He then started his fire in the base of the soft coal, and half closing the open end of his unique crucible, took up his bellows. Within five minutes his hard coal had caught fire. Within ten, it was a glowing mass of red and blue flames. And now he knelt, and perspiration started as he pumped the bellows as never a blacksmith did.

The hard coal fire blazed blue and white; a seething heat. The two lumps of ore grew crimson, then white, and finally crumbled.

And then, panting from frantic effort, Old Renus

saw first, a tiny dark and next a white rill of molten silver run out over the bottom slab of slate!

He had solved his problem and found a fabulous fortune!

But so dazed was he, so benumbed by the wonder world of vast riches that were now his, that he stared down at the tiny rill of silver speechless, and scarcely conscious where he was.

He had, in his time, watched from beside the highway of life, and seen what vast riches meant. He had seen the gold and silver kings who could not spend their incomes. He had seen their palaces, their yachts, their private trains, when they chose to travel; their army of servants and how even the law could be made subservient to their will. He had seen how cities and states honored them, how legislatures did their bidding and how even royalty unbent to them.

And here, a half mile away and unknown to all but him, lay the same omniscient power.

All his, his to do with as he willed!

Slowly a mental picture arose of Oakham and the future of the boys. He saw what they would ordinarily develop into there; mere plodding farmers. He saw them as such, ploughing, planting, hoeing and reaping, year in year out, and leading a simple, frugal life, to end under a low

white stone on the hillside. Another picture flashed on his brain, of them, dowered with this vast wealth; and as he beheld the glittering future, he felt afraid for them. Perhaps after all he was only building ill. Planting riches that might yield sorrow.

This feeling with its medley of unusual thoughts finally left him, and he was Old Renus once more. Then he pried the little patch of hard silver away from the slab of slate in front of the dying fire, put it in his pocket, kicked his crucible to pieces, picked up his bellows and returned to camp.

Little did Orlo realize that evening, when they all sat around their little table—once the door of the old trapper's cabin—why Old Renus watched him with such smiling wistfulness, or why at times, when the cheery fire lit up his deep set eyes, they seemed misty with unshed tears.

But then Orlo was only a boy to whom life was yet an unknown realm.

With morning came a new resolve, and that was to take Orlo into his full confidence concerning the fabulous mine, and the one supreme hope it had brought him. He knew that to secure both he must make proper registration, accompanied by a map and full description of the mine and location; and the date of discovery, with names of witnesses if there were any. He could also buy as much of the

wild land surrounding it as he chose at government price; have that duly recorded, and then the mine and land would become his to work, sell, or bequeath as he saw fit. But only he knew this now. His original plan, while waiting to test the one, had been to keep his secret until he returned to Oakham, then to transfer the deed to Orlo's mother in trust for him, with a twenty percent. royalty to be paid Jim and Levi on all net returns from the mine. He meant to retain a managing interest in it for life; to return, and hiring men and buying a few tools and a smelting outfit, transport them to Camp Castaway and begin developing the property. But all this well considered plan really hinged upon his own life. If by some accident on the way out, some upset in icy water; being swept over some cataract while running down an unknown stream, he should lose his life; why, his well-beloved boys would never receive any benefit. So far he had escaped the few dangers in these woods. But greater ones lay ahead, far more serious than winter storms or wolves. Clearly Orlo must be informed, to doubly protect this all important discovery.

"I want to take another look around the lake bottom, 'fore we start out, boys," he said to them that morning. "You Jim, 'n' Levi can go 'n' tear down the two dams 'n' let the trout out 'n' Orlo

can go with me. We won't need any more fish now, I cal'late."

Orlo of course followed him dutifully on this excursion, wondering why it was taken but saying nothing while they kept on around the lake bottom shore, until the deep and impressive gorge was entered.

"Kin ye guess what that is, Orlo?" asked the old man, picking up a bit of black ore and handing it to him.

"Why no, Uncle Renus, only it's queer looking stone not like any other here," he answered.

"O' course not, 'n' nobody else kin 'thout he war a miner or knew what I found out yisterdey. This gorge is a split in this mountain 'n' most on't below the trap rock is jest that same sort o' soft black stun, I cal'late. It's a wonderful find, I tell ye," he added, smiling down into the boy's surprised face. "One that'll most knock ye over when I 'splain it. Kin ye keep it a secret, hope to die if ye don't? Keep it from Jim and Levi or anybody, so help ye?"

"Of course I can, Uncle Renus," Orlo answered earnestly. "I will do anything you wish. Why shouldn't I?"

"Wal, then come out o' this to a sunny spot so I kin begin right. 'Tain't but once in any man's life he kin tell what I kin now."

He led the way out to a wind-sheltered, sun-warmed nook overlooking the white-capped lake, then sat down with Orlo close beside him. Orlo, feeling sure some wonderful story, some astounding secret was soon to be told, sat a little closer for that reason. "I'm ready, Uncle Renus," he then said, smiling up at the wistful face turned to his. "Ready to be knocked over or struck dumb, Uncle Renus."

"Wal, then," after a long pause, "in the fust place I'm going to tell you 'bout myself 'n' a dream I once had. You're old 'nuff to understand it, jest beginnin' to feel a tech o' the same sort, I know. I war born on Hardscrabble mountain north end o' Goshen 'n' north end o' any chance in life, seein' ez I got left an orphan at six 'n' bound out to an old skinflint named Newell. 'Twas thin pickin,' too, at meal time I tell ye, with this oak bark cuss. Rye bread 'n' sorgum mainly 'n' pork 'n' beans fer luxuries. My bed war corn husks with the butts on 'n' I never had sheets. But work war plenty. Sixteen hours on't a day in summer time, 'n' eight winters 'fore 'n' arter school 'n' by lantern light mostly. I lived it through, howsomever, got my time at twenty-one ez the law said, 'n' lit out fer Goshen 'n' a chance to 'arn suthin'.

"I war so green the tater bugs chased me 'n'

"'Kin ye guess what that is, Orlo?'"

so 'fraid o' gals I'd most run away from one. But I fell in love with one fer all o' thet. One o' the sweetest lookin' angels in white I'd ever sot eyes on, I thought. 'N' I got so crazy arter her I felt happy to hev her make faces at me. Likewise felt all the worry I'd had so fer war happiness. But she wan't fer me or I fer her, I found out 'n' so I went away. All that happened most forty years ago, but I've kept livin' that one summer over ever since. It allus seems like the sound o' far-off bells to me, or a new mown medder in the moonlight.

"That's the way with all on us," he added, after a long meditative look at Orlo's upraised face. "A dream we all hev sometime 'n' while it lasts we think Heaven is jest ahead." Then he paused, sighing faintly, and looked far over the sparkling lake a long moment while Orlo glanced up with a new wonderment.

"I've been a rollin' stone ever since," he continued after a while, "but I gathered jest 'nuff moss to hide my old carcass when my time comes. I've seen a good deal o' this kintry, too, mountains, lakes, rivers, 'n' mines, 'n' worked at most everything to do it. 'N' it war workin' in mines ez prospector fer ore that made me fetch ye here, Orlo. 'N' now I'm goin' to knock ye over, my boy."

Once more he paused while Orlo looked up, almost gasping.

"You've seen the deep gorge back o' us most half a mile long," Renus continued, with an odd smile. "Seen the piles o' black rock in it; seen the sides o' the same sort o' stun. Wal, that black rock 'n' most o' this mountain, I cal'late, is silver lead ore 'n' wuth more millions o' dollars 'n' you've got hairs on your head, Orlo. I know it 'cause I smelted some yisterday. 'N' it's all mine as soon ez I git a deed on't recorded when we go out."

A "good Lordy Lord," came from Orlo, too astounded to say more.

"'N' what be I goin' to do with it mebbe you're thinkin'," the old man continued, now stroking the boy's head. "Wal, when I git a deed on't I'm goin' to sign it over to yer mother to keep in trust fer you till ye grow up big 'nuff to work it. O' course Jim 'n' Levi's goin' to hev their share, too. I'll fix thet. Only you bein' older, 'n' I cal'late may turn out a leetle more keerful, had better be the head one. 'N' that's why I brought ye here 'n' made ye promise not to tell Jim or Levi yit. Not a hint."

'' 'N' then ag'in, Orlo—you—wal, no matter why, you sorter 'mind me o' somebody else I once knew in your looks 'n' ways, 'n' mebbe that's 'nother reason fer feelin' ez I do towards ye. It's nothin', jest a notion o' mine. But it's whims that sorter leads

us on through life, 'n' mebbe yer face is my whim."

The waves sparkled afar over that shallow, wilderness-bordered lake. A low whisper of wind sighed through the dense spruce back of this man and boy. A kingfisher lit on a dead limb to watch the two below, one staring at the face above him, the other looking far away through the vista of whitened trees, faint and spectral over the glinting water.

On the man's face was the look of one gazing into the dim past of a lost youth. But the boy seemed looking into a new world. One far beyond his comprehension.

"We'd better be startin' back now, Orlo," the man said finally, sighing once more and rising. "Jim 'n' Levi 'll wonder what's keepin' us."

But the boy answered not at all. He only clung to the man's hand as they turned back.

Of course such an astonishing revelation and promise quite upset Orlo, so much that he knew not whether he had lost his reason or Old Renus had. For six years now he had not only been mystified by this fine old woodsman, but had grown more fond of him; to feel he was like a father to him. He had also so far failed to solve two riddles: he first wondered why Old Renus came to Oakham to live in such an old rookery when he was able to buy or build a more respectable home.

And beyond that was a deeper mystery: why his mother, so careful always of his associates, had from the first been willing that he should fish and hunt with the old trapper. This mystery he could not even hint to him, of course, but it vexed him for all that. He was not the boy to cut a drum open to find what made the noise, however, but was satisfied to take Old Renus just as he came, and be more and more thankful for the joys he brought him. But this wonderful news of a fabulous fortune to be given him later on, so upset him, so threw him off his boyish poise, that he forgot where he was and what still lay ahead of them.

And he had given his sacred promise not to even hint it to Jim and Levi!

Neither did he dare hint how astonished and mystified he was, for fear their questions and suspicions might end in offending Old Renus. This was a weighty and momentous secret that was kin to a miracle. One to make him forget the dangers that lay ahead, the furs they had secured, the canoe voyage, soon to be undertaken, and his keenly anticipated home coming; even his mother's joy over his safe return!

It was also a full day before he recovered even a little of his self-poise, or began to realize whether he was afoot or ahorseback.

CHAPTER XXIII

OLD RENUS had only one more duty to perform, and that was to cut his name and address and a guessed-at date of the discovery of this silver mine upon two boards and nail them to trees well back in the cañon. Also to draw a rude map of the mine and its location. Keen to the ways of claim jumpers, he made a copy of this charcoal map on birch bark, wrapped it in deerskin, and buried it at the mouth of the cañon.

He took Orlo along when he did so, that if he lost his life going out, the boy's heritage might be found and claimed by him. "It's only guardin' 'gainst what might happen," he told Orlo. "I mean to git out alive, o' course, 'n' take a lot more comfort. But then I mightn't, 'n' 'twas to protect you boys I told ye what I did yisterday. 'N' then ag'in some trappers who knew what silver ore was, might blunder into that gorge. O' course it's only one chance in a million, but I'm cal'latin' to head

that one off. I mean to get out o' the woods, too, jest ez fast as we kin now, so as to git this mine matter all secure. Such a find ez that needs lookin' after quick. I only hope we won't hev to go out by way o' Hudson Bay, for if we do it won't be no joke."

He was in no hurry to start on that "joke" either, but wisely waited until the last ice had vanished from the big lake, when he began to pack and get ready for the long canoe trip.

"We got to leave everything we can do without, boys," he said to them. "The small pelts, lynx 'n' bobcat skins, tent 'n' silk bags with a few cookin' dishes we'll take, o' course. Some b'ar meat, too, 'n' we'll bake a bag full o' hard biscuit, 'n' take all our coffee. But even so much'll mean two trips 'round any carry."

Leaving so many of their household belongings seemed like a personal loss to the boys, especially the traps, bear and wolf skins; but they were growing woodwise now and were beginning to understand what a long water journey would mean.

The uneaten meats to be left were all added to the pile of wolf bones, near the ledge. The cabin was swept out and put in order, the old canoe carried inside of the barricade, and as a final touch of breaking up housekeeping, Old Renus carved the name "Camp Castaway" on a strip of pine and

nailed it above the cabin door. And then came the leave-taking.

To the boys who had been dropped into this primeval forest nine months before, frightened and helpless, this rude stone cabin had become an almost "Home, Sweet Home." In it they had lived warm and secure from deep snow, bitter cold, dangerous lynx and fierce wolves. Here they had learned many lessons not taught in schools: self-reliance, resolution and the fact that modern luxuries are not necessary to health and happiness. And they had realized a deeper truth; that an eccentric old nondescript, a so-called vagabond, might yet possess enough forethought and kindness of soul to be as a father to them. At first he had appealed to them only as a romantic old hunter and trapper, but now they knew him as a broad-minded, kind-hearted and unselfish man. For these reasons, for what Old Renus and this wilderness home had been to them, all three of the boys, when they turned for a final look at Camp Castaway, saw it through tears.

But Old Renus felt that he was only leaving it for a few months, and was sure of his ability to make his well-beloved boys rich for life.

He was almost buoyantly happy when they pushed their well-laden canoe into the lake that bright May morning, not five rods from where they

first landed. A few bluebirds added a musical send-off. Two deer, not far away, watched them curiously. A warm south wind rippled the blue water, and even his fear that they were starting for Hudson Bay was not enough to discourage him now.

The two lakes were soon crossed, with all four paddling, the long shadowy reach to the first carry as well, and by noon the two portages were made, a hasty meal cooked and eaten, and at sunset that day Old Renus pulled the canoe out in front of the willow thicket where he had watched the two wolves, and camp was made.

From here on it was an unknown stream to him, and progress was slower for the reason that two unseen dangers lay ahead: hidden rocks in the stream, and an insidious current above a dangerous rapid or leaping falls to catch and sweep them down to destruction. The stream was broader now, and the trend of the mountains was still to the north. The usual variations of a canoe journey came in due order that second day. Wide swamps, now alive with wild ducks, miles of slow running stream shadowed by a primeval growth of spruce and larch, lakelets that opened out of the forest like broad smiles of rippled water, and carries that taxed the boys' strength and patience to the utmost. The one disconcerting feature,

however, was that the trend of the stream and lay of the mountains continued to the northward. Old Renus, anxiously watching both of these signs, kept hoping that each day, each hour down the broader stream would see a change in its direction and flow to a more southerly one. There were other signs equally disconcerting. The first and most ominous was that after two more days' journey on a rapidly flowing current, having made fully one hundred miles, no signs of lumbermen's mark had yet been passed. Not a bit of driftwood showed the mark of an ax. There was not a gap in the primal wilderness; no signs of a "tote road." The animals and birds were tame, as at Camp Castaway. Deer that were seen near the stream only stared at them calmly. A lordly bull moose surprised upon a bush-covered point, stood stock still as their canoe swept round it, his only move being to shake his antlered head and turn to watch them out of sight. Once a bobcat was spied crouching flat upon a tree bending over the stream, but he only glared down at them with fierce, yellow eyes. The many pairs of ducks swimming around in the swamp-bordered open spaces did not even quack their surprise or fly, and all this proved to Old Renus that human visitors to this vast wilderness had been few and very far between. Only two human trails had they ever found, one

being that of the dead trapper. Old Renus began to watch anxiously for others when each carry was reached, as he had for signs of a lumberman's visit, with the hope that later trails might be seen. That first one, faint and dim, hid in that dismal, swampy spot, began to seem pathetic as well as ominous, and as he recalled that trapper's grinning skull, it was horribly suggestive of what might overtake them in this pathless forest.

At mid-afternoon the next day, the fifth, they entered a narrow defile through a low mountain. Here the stream, scarce a rod wide, was almost currentless, but black and somber in the shadow, while from far ahead came the muffled roar of a cataract.

"Looks kinder skeery to me, boys," Old Renus declared, glancing at the rock wall on either hand. "Kinder like slidin' into a trap. 'N' I don't like that rumblin' ahead. Sounds like high falls. If this gorge don't open out 'fore we come to quick water, we'll hev to turn back. We'd be helpless if we got caught by the broken water."

It soon grew shadowy in this narrow defile and Old Renus, watching ahead and listening to the low rumbling, scarcely noticed the current that bore them on until the cañon opened out wider, and then he saw the bordering walls apparently sliding backward at a dangerous speed. One in-

stant he glanced at them, then on ahead to notice a few stunted cedars growing out from a low ledge and to catch the louder roar beyond them. Then, and with a sudden chill of fear, he realized their situation.

They were caught in a flume-like current, between high walls, with a cataract just ahead!

"Turn 'round quick, Orlo, 'n' paddle backward!" he shouted, then wheeled, himself, in an instant. Deep into that black, swift water he sunk his paddle with vigorous strokes, tossing water backward in a shower. Inch by inch, the canoe, quivering between his fierce strokes and the swift current, moved backward. Now as Orlo also caught the dread situation and added vigor to his strokes, the gain grew. Inches at first, then a foot, then a rod! A battle between that onward current, sweeping them towards a roaring cataract and death, and human strength! Sweat started from the face of Old Renus, now kneeling and fighting with gritted teeth that merciless suction of water. Orlo, equally scared, threw every ounce of his young strength into the fight, while Jim and Levi, helpless, sat with beating hearts gripping the canoe rails.

Then, just as the margin of safety was reached, the paddle Old Renus was fighting for life with, snapped in two!

Two more paddles lay under the bundles back of him. He turned instantly to grab one. The canoe slid backwards twice the distance they had made, and when once more he struck the seething current, no paddle could hold it!

"My God!" he exclaimed, whirling about once more, "we're goners!"

To catch and hold onto those stunted cedars below was now their only hope!

"Stop paddlin' 'n' turn quick, Orlo!" Old Renus shouted. "I'm goin' to ketch hold o' one o' them cedars, but don't you till I tell ye," and he thrust his paddle in to steer.

With quick thought he now chose the middle and largest of the three trees as the best to grasp. It was not bigger than his wrist, but he knew its roots ran into sod-covered cracks in the narrow ledge wall. Would it hold the on-sweep of their heavy-laden craft or not? On that their lives depended now!

Nearer and nearer the whitening water swept the canoe.

Louder and louder came the menacing roar ahead.

A mist rose above that bellowing cataract.

Then, with teeth shut hard, Old Renus gave one last in-swing to the canoe, tossed his paddle aboard, and grasped that frail cedar stem.

It held!

"Git out quick now, you 'n' Jim," he next ordered. "'N' you, Orlo, hand out things fast ez ye kin to lighten the canoe."

It was speedily done; then grasping the painter with one hand, Old Renus climbed onto that narrow shelf.

"Thank God!" he said, drawing a long breath. "It was a close call!"

He then pulled the light, swinging craft half out of the seething current. They stood on a shelf of rock, three feet wide by four rods long, sod-covered and grass-grown.

But their lives were saved!

Old Renus smiled.

"I've been a dum fool many times, boys," he said, "but never any more double dum fool 'n' when I ran into this split mountain. 'N' 'twar only the Lord's help that saved us!"

But what a fix they were in!

Back of them the jagged rock wall sloped upward fully twenty feet to a crowning thicket of scrub spruce. Below, the sheer face wall met the current.

"Kin ye climb it, Orlo?" Old Renus asked, peering above them.

"I got to," the boy answered resolutely.

"Wal, pile the things lower down," Old Renus

directed calmly, "so I kin pull the canoe out. Then we'll see."

It appeared almost impossible even to this resourceful old woodsman, for only a few slightly jutting rocks appeared in the smooth wall well up toward the top, and above them but one narrow crack.

For a long moment Old Renus studied the situation, then with a "We kin do it, boys," picked up the extra long painter they had braided from their balloon tethering rope. "Now, boys," he continued, "all on ye take off moccasins 'n' socks. You, Levi, tie one end o' this painter 'round your waist. It's got to be a case o' Jacob's ladder, 'n' I'm your Jacob. Orlo stands on my shoulders, Jim climbs onto his, 'n' you're the top monkey. But keep your heads, all o' ye."

The human ladder was thus built, fortunately a leaning one, and Levi, quite elated at the honor, eagerly scrambled onto the spruce-covered top.

The camp ax was then sent up to him to cut and clear away an open space. Various bags and bundles followed, and when the paddles and rifle were drawn up, one end of the long painter was made fast to the canoe, the other to a stout scrub spruce by Levi, then Orlo and Jim in turn soon climbed this. Old Renus next lifted on the canoe,

while the three boys pulled it up with the rope. But now came a less easy stunt for him.

"Tie knots in the rope 'bout a foot apart," he called to Orlo, and when this was done, he soon joined the boys.

"More'n one way to skin a cat, eh, boys?" he declared, looking around him. A long and narrow lake lay below them, with openings at either end. "But it's goin' to be some fuss to cut a hole through this tangle below us," he meditated.

"We're goin' to solve the riddle o' war, we be, tomorrer," he added a moment later, as if the almost fatal episode just passed was forgotten. "'N' if, as it looks, this lake hez two outlets, it's a partin' o' the ways fer us."

"I don't worry much about where we are, Uncle Renus," Orlo put in. "Or anything else either, after what we just went through. We'd be dead now if it hadn't been for you."

"We sartin would, my boy," he said, smiling. "'N' that's why I war such a double dum fool to 'a' so got caught. But fergit it now it's all over," for that was Old Renus and his philosophy.

Only a moment longer he waited to glance down at the rainbow tints glinting in the mist above the cataract. Two processions of white foam flecks were floating slowly north and south across the placid lake below; the sun was almost down to the

green ridge just west of them; and two deer were feeding on the lake shore. Seizing the camp ax, Old Renus began cutting a path down through the tangle.

This took a full hour; the canoe was next shouldered by Orlo and himself; and, just as the sun vanished below the ridge, they launched their craft and paddled hurriedly across to an out-jutting rock on the opposite shore. There was an ideal camp site beside it, that was soon cleared of scrub spruce; the tent was set up, a fire started, and supper was soon cooking.

They had so far camped five times since leaving their winter home, most of those halts being alongside the stream, but none had the wildwood charm of this one with the snow-white cataract just across and broad patches of foam drifting slowly away from it to right and left. An hour later when the darkness had shut them in, the fire freshened, and Old Renus, puffing his cob pipe, lay beside it, an ethereal touch was added; for now the moon slowly rose above the low mountain facing them. The cataract began to flash silver glints. The foam patches in unending procession gleamed snow-white as they crossed the moon's shining path, and to the steady rumble of the falls was added the low tinkle of running water at the lake outlet close by. Probably the charm of that scene

was enhanced by the sense of their present safety after the danger they had just passed through.

"Kinder consolin' to feel safe once more, ain't it, boys?" Old Renus commented.

"I've had clus calls, a good many on 'em, in all my wanderings," he continued, after refilling and lighting his pipe. "Once on the plains, with a half-dozen others on mustangs, a band o' Piute Injuns chased us all one forenoon till we come to a round hill, then we halted to pick 'em off one by one or drop their ponies as they circled, round us, shootin'. It war kill or git killed then 'n' two o' the prospectors with me bit the dust as it war. Once I war cornered by a Grizzly with only a six-shooter in my belt. I plugged away five shots 'n' only the last one fetched him. 'Nother time I got swamped in a rapid, losin' my pack, rifle, matches, canoe 'n' everything, 'n' tramped five days to git out. 'N' all I had to keep alive with war a knife. But all o' them scrapes wan't quite equal to the minute we war headin' fer that cedar bush."

In the morning, Old Renus duly considered their next step. If two outlets of the lake joined again and ran south or even west it would be fortunate. If not, and both kept on to join some larger stream many miles away, then it would become a question of which was the easier to follow. In either case a long carry must be made.

"We'll load up," he directed after breakfast, "'n' take time 'n' look both outlets over. We hev got to find those trappers' trails now."

This was imperative; so he launched the canoe and paddled to the south outlet, where he landed, and followed by the eager boys, looked carefully down along the right bank for some fifty rods.

But no signs of any trapper was found.

The left bank was then examined with no better results. There were many marshy spots, in which footprints would remain for years, but none were discovered.

"Looks like nobody ever come down this stream," Old Renus declared, pushing the canoe off. "We'll try the other one." Here they met with better luck, for a few rods below the drift-choked outlet, and leaning against a boulder, were a dozen alder poles and upon them a mat of dry, bare spruce boughs. One end of this rude shelter was half thatched in the same way, while in front of the other end, and almost hidden under a mat of dead ferns, lay the charred ends of firewood.

"Them trappers camped here, sure's a gun," Old Renus declared excitedly; then, after carefully poking the dead ferns away from the black embers, added: "'N' it war only a year ago this spring, so it's the two whose tracks we saw up back. Here's whar they cut poles fer the lean-to," he con-

tinued, pointing to some stumps nearer the stream, then he pushed on to a marshy spot in the alders where sunken tracks were plainly seen.

"They carried by on this side, too," he added, after listening a moment. "'N' it's a long one by the far sound 'o runnin' water." Returning to the canoe he sat on its bow and looked around. First at the low mountain and out-leaping cataract; next at the valley opening to the south, then down the one below them.

"Boys, I'm stumped," he said finally. "'N' I don't know which way to go. Both o' these outlets look to hev long carries. By the sound 'n' lay o' the land it may be a mile or more. Then they may come together a spell on. If they don't it's the south one I think we'd best foller in spite o' what I fust thought 'n' said. Now I cal'late we'd best go back to that 'n' I'll push on down a mile or so while you boys wait."

"I may be gone an hour or two," he explained, after the lake was crossed once more and canoe drawn out. "But you boys kin rig up poles, and an anchor fer the canoe, 'n' ketch a few minnows in some pool below here 'n' we kin hev fried trout fer dinner. If ye stay out in the canoe no prowlers kin scare ye. They won't be likely to come 'round anyway. 'Taint the season to be worried 'bout 'em now." With this final thought for the security

of his well beloved boys, he dove into the dense undergrowth alongside the stream and vanished.

For the first time since they stepped out of the collapsed balloon's wicker-basket, the three boys were alone in this vast wilderness.

They scarcely noticed it at first, but boy-like, made haste to rig poles, catch minnows and with bits of dry alder sticks for corks, were soon anchored out in the lake waiting for bites. They came in a-plenty, and within an hour, a dozen good sized trout had been yanked into the canoe and the bait exhausted.

"Let's go ashore and get ready to cook dinner," Orlo proposed. "Old Renus must be back soon and I am getting hungry." This was done, and while Levi dressed the trout Orlo and Jim gathered dry limbs for fuel. Then they all sat down to wait. And waiting soon made them nervous. The solemn vastness of the wilderness became oppressive. The steady roar of the falls across the lake sounded louder. A crow on a dead treetop cawed ominously; two more up back on the ridge added the raucous cries they knew meant anger. Perhaps it was caused by a bobcat devouring their young? Other sounds from within the dark forest became magnified as they listened; a catbird's call became the snarl of a bobcat; the bark of a gray squirrel grew to the growl of a lynx;

while the noise of ground squirrels running among dry leaves became the scamper of wolves.

Why had not Old Renus returned.

Orlo looked at his watch to figure out how long their sole protector had been away. Fully three hours was as near as he could guess, and Renus had said, "an hour or two."

It was almost one o'clock!

"I can't understand why Uncle Renus don't get back," he declared.

"I wish he would," Jim answered. "I am most starved."

"And it must be past noon," Levi added. "He ought to be back now."

"It's past one o'clock," Orlo said, "and he's been gone most four hours."

"But what be we goin' to do about dinner?" asked Jim.

"Well, I ain't worrying about that," the older boy returned. "I am afraid something's happened to him."

"Oh Lord," exclaimed Levi, the most helpless of the trio. "What'll we do if there has?"

"Oh, I don't know, I don't know!" cried Orlo, now giving full expression to the dread fear fast coming upon him. "But we mustn't get frightened," he added, glancing into the two scared faces

watching him. "And I think we'd better go and meet him."

The fright of the two boys suddenly calmed Orlo and he felt that he must take the lead and think and act like a man. He had thought a good deal about the wonderful news Renus had told him, not only about the fabulous mine and his intentions, but the more pathetic story of the old man's heart history. He began to feel what his mother must have suffered in his absence, the tears she must have shed, and how nearly dependent she was on his young life, and now brought face to face with this new danger, with the one they all owed their lives to, possibly lost or crippled he was lifted in an instant from a care-free boy to a man, ready to do a man's duty.

"Jim and I must go at once," he ordered. "And you, Levi, must stay here and watch things. Some bear or bobcat might come and eat up all we got."

"Oh, I won't, no way," Levi answered, beginning to tremble at this dire situation. "Some bear or lynx might eat me up!"

"If you're goin' to be 'fraid cat," Orlo said, with a shade of contempt, "why, climb a tree and stay there or sit out in the canoe. Come now, don't be a baby. You know the last thing Uncle Renus said was, we needn't be afraid of wild animals, and he knows."

"We must cook and eat a bite," he added, hurriedly starting a fire. "Jim and I may have to carry Uncle Renus back, for he may have broken his leg. I know something must have happened or he'd be back by this time."

They prepared a meal hastily. A slice of fried meat and two dry biscuit were each one's portion. Then Orlo commenced reloading the canoe so that poor, scared Levi might sit safe in it a few rods from shore, and thus protect their almost priceless stock of food. Orlo kept their gun, however, and after seeing Levi anchored out of danger, resolutely led the way down the stream.

It ran on, leaping and cascading over ledges, sweeping around big boulders and was hard to follow on account of high rocky banks. He did not watch for the tracks of Old Renus, but pushed on as fast as possible. Now and then the old man's trail was seen in some soft spot, or where he had climbed a ledge. Once or twice Orlo would halloo, but no answer came save the steady rumble of the stream below. Now and then the stream would pitch into some cavernous pool, shadowy and dark, then emerge to spread over a broad, moss-coated ledge. For fully two miles the anxious boys pushed on, growing more and more worried, but not conscious of the lapse of time. One thing that did impress them was the risk they took in follow-

ing such a wild stream through narrow defiles and over rocks, moss-coated and slippery. They had to crawl backward down the rocks now and then and ford the stream at times knee-deep, and once they spied a wildcat lying flat upon an overhanging tree trunk. But still they kept on almost desperate, for Renus must be found.

"Oh, dear, I don't know what to do," Orlo finally exclaimed, as they halted to rest just after coming upon the trail of Old Renus across a spit of sand. "And why he came so far down this way I can't understand."

"He must 'a' had some reason," Jim answered, stooping to examine the fresh track carefully, "and I think we must be most up to him."

"Oh, no, not a bit of it," contradicted the wise Orlo. "He had all of three hours start of us. What I can't see is why he didn't turn back long ago. Let's go up the bank and I'll climb a tree to look ahead." He did this at once, and made two discoveries, one of a fearsome nature.

The sun was nearly down to the treetops!

"Do you know what time it is, Jim? it is most sundown," he asserted anxiously, when on the ground once more. "And," yanking his watch out, "it's half-past five. And the stream turns sharp north just below here," he added; and two pairs of eyes met in consternation.

"But what we goin' to do?" Jim queried, after the long stare.

"I dunno what to do," Orlo answered. "We got to find Uncle Renus somehow."

"But we can't go on after dark! And what good is it if the stream does go north below here? That won't help us any."

"No; only it may be a reason why he come down so far. He said the two streams might come together below the lake."

"We got to go back now, I guess," he added, after another long inquiring look at Jim.

"And hurry, too," that boy cautioned. "It's all the way up-hill and it'll be dark by the time we get back."

It was nearly so by the time they once more heard the rumble of the cataract across the lake. A loud hallo from Orlo the moment he spied the canoe out in the lake brought an answering one from Levi, who never before had been in such a pitiful state of abject fear. In fact, he had been actually crying for almost two hours.

They were all badly frightened, for Old Renus was evidently lost or crippled somewhere far away in this pathless wilderness. The darkness was so dense they could scarcely see the canoe. The roar of the cataract across the lake was louder than

an angry bull, and they felt that without Old Renus their situation was hopeless.

Just then and as if to accentuate it all, from the woods close by, came the snarling yaoul of a lynx.

CHAPTER XXIV

IT WAS fortunate for all the boys that Old Renus had taken Orlo into his confidence before leaving Camp Castaway, for now the I-must-be-a-man spirit gave him added courage, and the moment he heard that yaoul close by he lowered the rifle and cocked it ready to shoot.

"Here Jim, come git a fire started quick as you can," he shouted. "And you, too, Levi. Stop your whimpering and get some dry brush, cones, anything to burn. That will keep the lynx away. If you don't he'll be onto us in no time."

And thus spurred poor scared Levi did "get busy."

"We've got to take care of ourselves now," Orlo asserted almost pathetically, after the fire was well blazing. "And we've got to find Uncle Renus tomorrow. It's awful to think that he is in the woods with maybe a broken leg, and suffering. He will expect us to find him also, and we must. We won't ever get out of here if we don't."

They unloaded the canoe, carrying all their eatables to pile in the tent; then Orlo cooked a frugal meal of fried meat and coffee.

Once more the moon appeared to smile across the lake. The cataract was still roaring; the foam patches crossed the moon's silvered path, the brook sang as before, but the evening's charm was lost on the scared boys. All their thought was of their old hero, and what could have happened to him. They kept the fire blazing, for that seemed their only friend now. They sat about it until nearly midnight, then crept into the tent.

They were all awake at daylight to start the fire anew, wash in the lake, and cook a breakfast of fried trout. Some bear ham was also fried to take along on the hunt for Old Renus, and finally, Orlo, yielding to the pleading of Levi not to be left alone again, decided to pack their eatables in the canoe and moor it in the center of the shallow stream, leaving the lake. For the trip, he selected two of the silk blankets, an ax, a few slices of bear ham, the extra long painter, and as a final thought a frying pan and fish line. These were made into two packs, Jim and Orlo carrying one each lashed on their backs. Levi carried the rifle and by sun-up they started down stream again, anxious to find Old Renus.

It had taken them three hours the day before

to descend to the point where they had turned back and now they reached it in half that time. Here they halted long enough for Orlo to climb the tree and hallo a few times; then they pushed on. The way soon became easier, the cliff banks dwindled and the stream ran slowly through an almost level stretch of woods. Here the trail of Old Renus was distinct on the right bank. A half mile of this was soon covered, for but little brush grew beneath the giant spruce trees; suddenly an opening was seen ahead, and also a broader stream which was soon joined by the one they had followed.

But a greater surprise was in store, for on halting to take breath, they saw not two rods away on top of a low ledge the poles and dry brush of an old lean-to!

Lower down in the soft moss and spruce needles were well-defined footprints with the later ones of Old Renus, all leading up beside the broader stream.

"Well, I guessed right didn't I, Jim," said Orlo, with a share of elation. "I said yesterday after I climbed the tree there was another stream here and this is it. And it's the other outlet of the lake. Uncle Renus said there might be and he was right. We shall find him somewhere between here and the lake, maybe—he had to stay in the woods last

night and he'll come back to where we camped. I wish we'd left Levi there."

"I don't," Levi snapped back, "I wouldn't 'a' stayed there alone for a million dollars. I had enough of it yesterday."

From here it was easy to follow the plain trail of Old Renus, for the slow stream twisted and turned amid giant spruce and hemlock with no brush. They trod upon a thick carpet of moss and needles. The sun high overhead sent rifts of light down through the green canopy, adding a mystic charm. Long tufts of "whisker" moss depended from low branches in spectral array, making a unique stretch of forest unlike anything so far seen by the boys. It ended at the border of a swamp morass into which they saw the stream vanish, and then, still following the trail, they were forced to keep to the right. Miles of this swamp border was thus followed amid thick undergrowth and briars, until suddenly, after a detour around an outbend of this morass, they missed the trail of Old Renus. To go back and find it, was imperative; and when they started, they were still more confused by finding two trails mingling with their own smaller footsteps; and to add to this perplexity, they lost their sense of direction. Orlo said the stream they had left lay west, Jim was sure that it lay due north, while Levi had no idea at all.

"We are in a fix," Orlo declared dubiously. "But we've got to stick to the tracks of Uncle Renus or we are lost." Then as stories of what that meant occurred to him he grew nervous.

"There is one thing certain," he finally said, "and that is, if Uncle Renus turned back he had a reason. If we keep his tracks between us and the swamp we must find where he turned away from it." Then, recalling that the old man had once told him that the branches on the south side of trees were always the longest, he began to examine them.

"I was right," he declared, after a dozen had been inspected. "The swamp is due north of us." To verify that he next climbed an open spruce, then came down quite elated. "There's a small lake north of us," he added, "and higher land east. If we go that way we must come to our lake in time, or if we turn north then we'll come to the other outlet of it, sure."

This conclusion further perplexed them, for if Old Renus had not gone back to the lake, he must have kept on to find and follow the north outlet stream to it.

"I guess we best keep east," Orlo finally decided, and this they did for a quarter of a mile, and upon reaching the high ground and big trees met a glad surprise in a fresh trail of Old Renus.

It was leading due north!

The tired and worried boys were faint from hunger and it was almost one o'clock, so a halt was made beside a small brook, a fire was started and a frugal meal cooked and eaten. Then they went on.

But the trail of the lost man was not easily pursued on this harder soil. The boys dared not lose it again and so progress was slow. The sun kept sinking and the inevitable conclusion was reached; that they must pass the night in the woods. Their first night alone had been serious enough; to Orlo it had been one of fitful sleep, dreams of yellow-eyed prowlers, and of finding the dead body of Old Renus. But when he woke he realized they still had the canoe with plenty of food for a week or two. But now, with scanty food, and without their protector another night in the woods meant greater misery.

He led the way onward, however, not daring to say what he felt, but he watched the lowering sun with increasing dread. He hoped to find some opening in the grim wilderness to rig up a shelter in, and near a brook for his tongue was parched with thirst. But no sign of one came until the sun was close to the treetops, and then the welcome tinkle of running water was heard just ahead. So cheering did it sound that Orlo sprang onward,

halting on the edge of a deep gully through which a small stream chattered over bare, brown rocks, full twenty feet below. He stood one moment on the brink to see where he could get down; the next second the bank began to give away, he grasped a bush to save himself and the next thing he knew he had shot downward sideways, bush, sod and all, landing among the stones, bruised but unhurt; and as the other boys came up to halt on the gully's edge, Orlo saw that another cave-in had broken away the undermined bank just below him. He hastened to it with a faint hope, and there, sure enough, amid the fresh earth beside the rill was a plainly defined heel mark. It had been made by Old Renus of course, for his trail had been seen not five rods back. It gladdened Orlo in spite of his sore spots, for so fresh was the sign, the old hero must have been here within a few hours.

"He tumbled in same as I did," Orlo assured the other two. "That overhanging bank is a regular trap." He looked around to see where Old Renus had climbed out of the gully, and found not ten feet away, a tuft of brook-moss, blood-red!

It was surely blood Orlo saw as he picked up the moss. Big drops of blood also lay upon dry stones at the foot of the opposite bank; quite an ominous sign.

"He must 'a' got hurt when he fell," Orlo assert-

ed. "Here's more of it," he added, crossing to where some one had sat down on a tuft of sedge grass. "My, but he must 'a' bled a lot."

"Looks so," corroborated Jim, hastening up a few rods to the opposite bank. "Here's where he climbed out," he added, then a sharp, "come here" from him brought the other two excited boys who looked with wonder at a spot where two white birches had been hacked down with a knife, the top ends, two inches thick, cut off and fresh-leaved branches were strewn all about.

What did it all mean?

"It looks mighty queer to me," said Orlo, looking at Jim.

"I can't understand it," Jim answered, shaking his head. "Looks like he cut two clubs for something."

"Maybe he found a lynx was chasing him," Levi suggested, with an active appreciation of that danger.

Suddenly Orlo looked down the open rift. "Oh, Lordy, it's getting dark," he exclaimed. "We've got to rig up some shelter right away, and here too," he added, glancing around. " We can't waste time hunting for a spot. It'll be pitch dark 'fore we know it."

They chopped down and trimmed a dozen of the useful white birch trees, lashed their tops together

wigwam fashion, and covered them with spruce boughs. Levi, instructed by Orlo, started a fire, and by the time they had gathered and spread a meager bough bed, the grim forest was almost inky black. Then came the question of supper.

"Do you know boys, I don't think we'd best eat much tonight," Orlo declared, after the two packs had been opened.

"But why not," demanded Levi fretfully. "I'm 'most starved."

"I can't help that," Orlo answered, almost sternly. "All we've got is two slices of bear ham and a few biscuits. Half a slice is all we eat tonight, and only one biscuit apiece."

For a long moment Levi, less woodwise, stared at Orlo curiously, then as the real meaning of this precaution came to him, his lips quivered. "We ain't goin' to starve be we, Orlo?" he asked plaintively.

"Oh, no," more buoyantly. "We can catch some fish tomorrow maybe; I brought a line."

He was fast maturing in woodcraft and manly forethought.

Something happened a few minutes later though, that put all thought of supper out of their minds. Orlo and Jim had climbed down into the gully to kneel and drink from the brook, and Levi tossed a spruce bough on the fire to make it flare up bright-

ly, when, as the two beside the brook arose, from somewhere came a faint "hallo."

"Hear that?" questioned Orlo with a sudden heart leap. "Where was it from?" Then each held his breath the better to hear. In a moment and from up east of them came the same faint "hallo" but longer drawn. In an instant Orlo answered with all his lung power, then came back a double "hallo, hallo," faint but distinct.

CHAPTER XXV

"OH, that's him, I know," Orlo exclaimed rapturously as the faint "hallo" came quavering from far up the ravine. "And he's up above here, too, on this brook."

"Ain't that queer," Jim whispered, still listening carefully. Then once again a united "hallo" was returned.

"But what we goin' to do?" Jim asked, as they returned to the fire.

"Why, go and find him," Orlo answered resolutely.

"But how?" from Jim, again looking into the wall of darkness surrounding them.

"Why I dunno, but we got to anyway. He must be hurt. That's what that blood meant. Or maybe"—after a moment's thought—"he's got a broken leg or sprained his ankle going over the bank. Maybe that's what he cut the birches for, to make a crutch."

To Orlo, now thinking as a man, it seemed an

imperative yet almost desperate thing to do, to go out into that inky blackness.

And it was!

For a long moment he gave it thought, then an inspiration came. "We can peel birch bark and make torches," he said, "and maybe he kept along the brook, so we can follow that."

It seemed possible to Jim now, and both set about peeling strips of bark. "We can make 'em burn longer by rolling 'em on dry sticks," Jim next suggested, and this was done.

When a good supply of those were ready, Orlo advised that Levi should remain at the fire to keep it going. But a sharp "I guess not, I wouldn't stay here alone noways," put an end to that. The packs were rolled up, each boy swallowed a few bites of raw ham and one biscuit, and then the start was made.

It was a slow progress over a tangle of moss-coated stones with only the fitful light of one bark torch to guide them. These also burned out with alarming frequency. Now and then a barricade of tangled roots and brush was met, to be crawled over. At intervals of a few rods they would pause to hallo again and always to hear an encouraging answer, yet seemingly no nearer. To add discouragement, their torches almost gave out, which necessitated a halt and a hunt for more white

birches. For a time the way led up a steep hill down which the brook ran. Once they heard the now familiar yaoul not far away, and later, the more ominous bark of a wolf. A sharp turn in the stream brought an uplift in their feelings as a nearer answer was returned to their oft-repeated hallo. Only two more torches were left when a shout close by added speed to the tired searchers' feet; a faint glow of light was then seen and with a "hurrah" in concert, the happy boys saw Uncle Renus squatting beside a tiny fire close by the little brook.

Leaning against a rock back of him lay two rude crutches!

"Oh Lord, but I'm glad to see ye, boys!" was his greeting, as they rushed up to grasp his hands. "'N' I'm proud o' ye, too," he added, with a choke in his voice. "I knowed ye'd start lookin' fer me but didn't dare hope ye'd find me till I saw a glow o' light over in the woods; then I crawled up back o' here onto a big rock 'n' got an answer to my holler."

"But what happened?" put in Orlo.

"Oh, nuthin' much," he said, smiling. "Only a sprained ankle 'n' a bumped nose so I bled like a stuck pig. I rigged up a couple o' sticks to help out 'n' started to go back to ye over the ridge."

"But when did it happen?" from Orlo.

"Oh, this mornin'; only I was in such a hurry I fell over a bank, like a fool."

"But ain't you 'most starved?" from Orlo again.

"Not overmuch," nonchalantly. "I killed 'n' skinned a hedgehog 'n' broiled a piece this noon 'n' ag'in 'bout dark. The only thing I worried 'bout war that you boys 'ud git lost huntin' fer me. That seemed most sartin. I warn't worried much 'bout myself, howsomever, long ez I had one workin' leg. I knew I could fetch back in time.

"Why, I've been wuss off many a time in winter, but no man need go hungry in the woods this time o' year."

The boys felt like dancing around him for very joy. They made haste to build a more generous fire, and to construct a rude shelter; then, in response to their hero's request, brought water in their hats to bathe his swaddled and swollen ankle.

"'Tain't so wuss, a sprained ankle ain't," he declared indifferently. "Jest keep it water-soaked a few days 'n' gin it stiddy rest is all. You'll hev to go fishin' now on the lake a spell while I lay by."

It was well along towards midnight when Orlo propped the frying-pan over the fire with most of their bear ham in it, but the old man interposed: "Better fry some hedgehog meat with a trifle o' salt ham to flavor it," he advised. "You'll find

him under a stone in the brook. It'll be a day or mebbe two 'fore we git back to the canoe."

Little sleep was obtained that night, for the boys were too excited and wanted to hear more of their hero's adventure. To him it seemed only an ordinary one, however. "What I figgered on war simple," he concluded. "Only I war a fool not to 'a' follered the two trappers' trail down the other outlet. I'd orter known they knew the best way out. My idee war, if the two streams didn't come together we must take the south one, so I tried to save time. It's allus best to go slow in the woods 'n' not guess at anything. One thing I feel safe in now. We ain't headed fer Hudson Bay. But what I can't line out is why no lumbermen ever got up here."

A daybreak start was made the next morning. By noon the birth of the brook was reached at a bubbling spring almost on top of the ridge, where a halt was made for more fried hedgehog and plenty of cool, sweet water; and the boys began to realize how little would satisfy hunger in the woods.

"'Tain't over-temptin' vittles, fried hedgehog 'n' nothin' else ain't," Old Renus smiled as he watched them munching it eagerly. "But I once went five days with nothin' but raw frogs legs 'n' brook suckers with wintergreen leaves 'n' berries

to top off with till I war lucky 'nuff to kill a mus'-rat out sunnin'. You'd sartinly turn up your nose at raw mus'rat till ye got hungry 'nuff, then you'd eat it mighty thankful. I did, I know."

The distant rumble of the falls pouring into the lake was heard soon after the spring was left, and the way being down hill now, Old Renus limped on faster. But twilight was creeping over the placid sheet of water before the camp was reached. Then the boys gathered fuel, started a fire, and soon a meal, a glorious feast rather, was made ready and all of them, quite happy, gathered around the cheerful campfire to gorge on trout fried brown in bear fat, with toasted biscuit dipped in the fat, and coffee with condensed cream. It was a happy supper, long to be remembered.

"To inj'y good things it's needful to go hungry a spell," Old Renus philosophized. " 'N' to be real happy ye hev to worry some fust. We've all had it two days, 'n' fried hedgehog, wholesome 'nuff meat, however, will sarve to make trout go all the better."

A week's stop had to be made here, "to git my leg in good workin' order," as Old Renus declared. It was also highly enjoyed by the boys, especially Orlo, to whom their protector delegated the task of shooting one of the tame deer in the

neighborhood. Trout were so plentiful they could choose the small ones in the two streams, and half an hour before meals was sufficient time in which to provide an ample supply. The north outlet was followed by Orlo and Jim one day to find smooth-running water in a quarter of a mile. A big bear gave them a good fright on the way back. The yellow-eyed prowlers made themselves heard nightly but were quite ignored now, and the boys were almost sorry to pack and start on their outbound trip again. It was with less worry that they turned away from the lake, for it seemed that their southward course was assured, and after a short carry, they reached a broad, two-foot deep stream, which sped over beds of swaying water grass and stretches of white sandy bottom for many miles, until from the north a smaller tributary entered. Just below the junction came a long carry, the first one since leaving the lake many hours before, and, drawing out their canoe, Old Renus was surprised and delighted to see four plainly outlined tracks in the sand.

"Hullo," he said, elated. "We got company on ahead 'n' it seems good to see tracks so lately made once more, arter nine months. One man wore moccasins 'n' tother war a bigger man. Should say one war a small feller 'n' the other an Injun.

"It can't be more'n a day since they carried by

here, either," he added, examining another foot-print where young grass had been trodden upon. "Wish we could ketch up to 'em and find whar we are."

These newly made tracks of human beings brought a strange thrill to the boys and it seemed as if they were back in the world again. They studied them with keen interest and with the same hope that Old Renus had. It was almost sunset when the foot of the long rapids was reached and camp for the night made. There, again, was more evidence of human kind in the recently charred embers of a fire and a fresh-bough bed left by the outgoing travelers.

"They wan't lumberjacks, so they must 'a' bin trappers," Old Renus asserted, after looking this camp site over. "'N' they broiled fresh deer meat 'n' had hard-tack 'n' coffee fer breakfast," he added, picking up a forked stick and sniffing at it.

"But how can you tell?" queried Orlo, to whom this peculiar wood lore was a mystery.

"Oh, easy 'nuff. Fust we ain't seen a stranded log or sign o' a tote road 'bove here 'n' no spike marks in any tracks. This prop-stick smells o' cooked venison 'n' thar's crumbs o' hard-tack 'n' coffee grounds. 'N' they cooked twice here I know by the 'mount o' ashes. I'd gin a good deal to ketch up with 'em."

Their tent was set up and then Old Renus, noticing a foam-flecked eddy just below the last rapid, made an interesting suggestion. "Thar's a nice spot fer trout, boys," he said, nodding towards it. "Ye might cut 'n' rig a couple o' poles 'n' ketch some for supper 'n' we'll hev some b'ar meat, too."

Jim and Levi did so, using a bit of bear pork for bait, and soon caught a goodly mess, for the pool was alive with the fish.

"I'd like to come onto a left-back log now," said Old Renus, filling a frying-pan with trout and then glancing down the broad stream. "Now 'n' then I'm most sartin we're headed for the St. Lawrence, 'n' then ag'in I ain't. I'd like to see a stray log most o' all. Some signs o' lumberin' 'ud look good to me now. I think we'd best push on fast 'n' ketch up with these two trappers. What makes me think we are where I fear, is the sun risin' so 'arly. 'Bout three o'clock 'cordin' to your watch, Orlo."

An early start was made the next morning, and by mid-forenoon another short carry around a leaping fall was reached and here the trail made a wide detour around a jagged ledge then down through a primal growth of monster trees. Here the fresh tracks of the two trappers were so distinctly outlined in the soft carpet of moss and

spruce needles that Old Renus halted to examine them carefully.

"They're carryin' a big load," he declared after scrutinizing what appeared to be the trail of a half-dozen men, "'n' had to make three trips to carry by. That means they must hev a big ketch o' furs. Some tracks are sunk deeper'n others, too, 'n' that says the packs are heaver'n the canoe. If we come to a long carry, we're like to ketch up." So anxious was he, that when this one was made, he shoved their canoe in and pushed off as if each moment counted. He wielded his paddle as if racing down the broad, slow-running stream, and when noon came no halt to cook was made, but Orlo cut slices of smoked venison to pass around for a lunch while on they went. By this time the sun had vanished in blue-black clouds, and coming upon a broad swamp through which the stream wound dark and sullen, a snow-squall suddenly swept over the green wilderness and Old Renus had to stop for he was unable to see his course, and so white was the air with those thick-falling flakes that he pushed into a lagoon and sought the shelter of an overhang of broad-branched firs.

"Queer streak o' weather, ain't it, boys?" he asked, shaking the snow from his broad hat and coat and lighting his pipe. "'N' it looks like we

war purty well up in the world, too. Snow-squalls don't start so quick in the lowlands."

Just then, and seemingly not over half a mile away, came the sharp report of a rifle followed by two more in quick succession.

"Good Lord," gasped Orlo. "Who's that?"

"Oh, them trappers," nodded Old Renus, smiling wisely. "'N' it sounds good to me. I knowed we wan't far behind 'em when we made that last carry. I think now they war thar jest a day ahead o' us."

"But what were they shooting?" came next from Jim, to whom these shots were like sounds from another world.

"A deer, most likely, they come onto in this fog o' snow," said the old hunter nonchalantly. "'N' if 'twould only let up we'd push on 'n' mebbe ketch 'em tonight. I'd gin a good deal to do it; I tell ye, boys, most anything human 'ud look good to me now."

"And me, too," coincided Orlo. "I'd think even a black man was handsome now."

That unwelcome snow-squall lasted for an hour longer; and when Old Renus resumed his paddle, and finally by calculation and a few mistakes, located the main stream and escaped the somber swamp, nightfall had come and camp had to be made. It was a cheerless, gloomy spot, with a

canopy of dense green boughs above and long tufts of weird gray moss depending from them. The soil was damp and soggy, a six-inch coat of rotting mould, moss and fir needles covering it; boughs for a bed were hard to find and by the time a few had been secured, the tent set up and fire started, an inky blackness enclosed the one consoling glow of light.

"Got caught in a bad spot, didn't we, boys?" Old Renus said, cheerfully, as was his wont. "But it might 'a' bin wuss. If we'd bin kept in that swamp an hour longer we'd 'a' had to slept in the canoe. I got caught that way once 'n' some raw venison 'n' hard-tack war all I had to eat till mornin'. That war one time a little salt went a good ways, I tell ye."

Their supper here was no banquet, either, for fried bear ham, dry rice biscuit and black coffee comprised it. But they had keen hunger for sauce and by this time the brave boys had become reconciled to almost any kind of food. This was at least far more palatable than their first wildwood meals. The time, place and situation were depressing, however. The campfire burned sulkily. To sit around it in comfort was impossible, and in spite of his unfailing optimism, Old Renus found it hard to cheer his disconsolate boys. They, however, more tired than usual from two carries and

steady paddling all day, soon turned in, leaving Old Renus to freshen the fire and follow later. He added the fuel, cut a few boughs to spread his blanket upon, lit his pipe again and sat down to think, for the fact was the problem of their situation troubled him. He had brought along all the stores he could, enough to last about three weeks. To have brought more meant leaving valuable furs; but what really concerned him was that he did not know where they were.

After descending a stream that had grown to a small river from many tributaries, he had failed to find any signs of lumbering operations, yet miles upon miles of the finest growing timber was standing beside a stream big and broad enough to carry it to the world's marts. The only conclusion was that they were on their way to Hudson Bay.

The fire burned lower. The black enclosing wall of darkness drew nearer. From somewhere to eastward of the swamp came the mournful howl of a wolf peculiar to the mating season. Once, twice, thrice, it quavered through the night, to be answered by the same call from the westward.

"Curi's, mighty curi's, 'n' I can't understand it, how wide apart in some ways 'n' how clus in others brutes 'n' humans is," Old Renus mused, poking the last of the embers together. "Each hez the

same heart call, but a wolf 'll tear his mate to pieces 'n' eat her a month arter with a relish, while a human, the true blue sort 'll carry his longin' through life. 'N' the only comfort he'll find is doin' suthin' fer the one he longs fer. It's a queer riddle, this thing is, 'n' I can't answer it."

He listened, while the low crackle of the fire died away, leaving the faint gurgle of the nearby stream the only sound; then, again, came the wolf call and the answer from afar.

"God gin it to us both, this love longing' 'n' I s'pose He did what war best," Old Renus added rising. "But it wouldn't 'a' done harm if He'd spread it a little more even." Then he sighed and crept carefully into the tent.

CHAPTER XXVI

LIFE is much like a canoe journey downstream and out of a wilderness, both in swiftness and fortune. For ten days the May sunshine and good luck cheered the castaways as they journeyed along, but on the next an unwelcome snowsquall marooned them in a somber swamp forest, and the bit of ill luck spoiled the sunshine for that day. The stream from this point turned sharply southward. A short carry was reached a mile onward, and in the middle of this and overlooking a picturesque cascade, Orlo and Old Renus came upon the embers of a campfire still smoking. And so startling was it that the canoe was lowered in an instant, and both stared at that faint column of smoke with intensive eagerness; it was almost as thrilling as the footprint in the sand was to Crusoe.

"They've got 'bout five hours the start o' us," Old Renus said disconsolately, glancing up at the sun. "'N' that dern squall jest got us left. If it

hadn't shut us in the swamp, we'd 'a' ketched 'em here. It's dern hard luck."

"Why, there's part of a deer they left," Jim exclaimed excitedly, as he came up to the open space on top of a ledge and dropped his pack. And sure enough, on a flat rock back of a stunted spruce, lay the fore-quarters of a deer with skin and head on. A bed of fir twigs in front of a rock ridge overlooking the falls showed where the men had slept under a canoe. A couple of big stones on either side of the smouldering fire, a wambeck bending over them, together with scraps of broiled venison, proved how these two unknown ones had feasted here a few hours before.

"They fetched this spot 'bout the time the squall war thickest," Old Renus asserted, looking around the flat-topped, grass-grown ledge, "'n' come onto a deer jest handy 'n' shot him off-hand. 'Twas them we heard. Nice spot to camp, too," he added, glancing down at the leaping cascades, above which rose a column of mist that flashed rainbow tints from the morning sun. "'N' we might 'a' had broiled venison with 'em, too, if that pesky squall hadn't ketched us in the swamp. We'll take what they left, anyhow." Then he made haste to skin the two forequarters and wrap them in a piece of silk.

"I think we kin ketch 'em, howsomever," he de-

clared, now hurrying down the ledge to the stream again. And so anxious was he that he did not wait to repack their belongings properly, but pitched them into the canoe and pushed off speedily.

"'N' we're headed south, too," he added with elation, and swinging into the swift current again. "'N' if the next carry's only a long one, we're sure o' ketchin' up to company. I'd gin a good deal to do it 'n' find whar we are for sure."

From here onward the stream was just right for canoeing, for it was narrow and deep, and swept on mile after mile in long curves through an open forest and had scarcely a rock in its swift current. The sun smiled down into it. Purling rills added music and foam flecks, and while the boys paddled eagerly, so swiftly did the moss-clad or grass-grown banks slip backwards that all Old Renus could do was steer.

"Goin' some, ain't we, boys?" he said, smilingly, after two hours of this delightful canoeing had passed and they came to a reach of still water. "It's cloudin' up 'n' feels like rain, howsomever, 'n' I cal'late we best keep on till it does. We may ketch up to our trappers by then."

The reach of slack water soon merged into a narrow lakelet and Orlo, in the bow, watched eagerly ahead to catch the first sight of the two

they were pursuing. But it was evidently a stern chase.

The stream broadened out beyond this lakelet to a shallow, swift-running river with small rocks jutting up that either fretted the current or peeped out of it. A dangerous course for a heavily laden canoe as Old Renus knew the instant they neared it.

"Watch out fer rocks 'n' stop paddlin', boys," he directed, grasping his setting pole and standing up. "We got to go slow down this run," and trained canoeist that he was he checked, held and swung his frail craft around, between or beside the rocks over which the stream swept in marvelous manner. A current ran like a mill sluice over the teeth-like rocks which were often so close together that passage for a canoe could only be found by swinging it from side to side across the stream. It was a fool thing to try, as Old Renus knew full well. But to land and carry by this half mile of shallow rapids, meant a delay of two hours, and he was in a desperate hurry. Time and again the canoe struck lightly as he held it by the setting pole and then pressed it back and let it swing away into deeper water, until this mad race was nearly run and the excited boys, ever watching for hidden rocks, began to breathe easier. The sky had grown inky black, however,

and Old Renus, balancing himself like a tall aerobat in that swaying canoe, could see no rocks except where water leaped over them. Then the stream dipped downward sharply and before he could help himself, the swift current caught the overladen craft sideways. He made a quick thrust with the setting pole to hold it back, but the pole's steel point slipped over the smooth rock. The canoe struck midway, tearing a long, wide hole. And before even Old Renus knew what happened, it was half full of water and the four had leaped out into the seething stream to grasp and hold it.

Just then a pelting volley of mingled hail and rain came down.

"Hang on, boys," shouted Old Renus, and wading hip-deep they managed to draw the canoe ashore. But they were in a sorry fix, for the bank was breast high and of soft clay. A dense tangle of scrub cedar and alders covered it, while, to add to their discomfort, the downpour became all hail.

"This is 'bout the wust ever," Old Renus growled, passing their belongings up to Orlo and Jim on the bank, while Levi held onto the half-filled canoe. "But it might 'a' bin wuss," he added, with his unfailing optimism a moment later. "We might 'a' lost our stuff out when we tipped."

The canoe was next emptied and drawn out, and so sharp came the pelting hail that Old Renus

tipped the craft over and, thrusting its bow into a low cedar, they all squatted under it, drenched as they were, and glad of so much protection.

"It's all my fault, boys," Old Renus said, forcing a smile. "'N' all 'cause I war fool 'nuff to try 'n' run down that shallow rapids. But I wanted to ketch up with those trappers 'n' took chances."

"But can we fix the canoe?" Orlo asked anxiously, for he was thoroughly alarmed over their predicament.

"Oh, yes; but it'll take a half day o' sunshine to patch 'n' dry it. We'll git out o' the scrape, somehow, boys, so cheer up. We got kicked by the devil's own luck, but we ain't goin' to be downed nohow. Now ez it's stopped hailin' we better make camp 'fore dark comes."

It was a sorry spot and a bad time to clear a space on the hard soil, and set the tent up, for it rained in torrents, but after their outfit had been sheltered and a fire started, they grew more cheerful. Fortunately their coats of deerskin were not quite wet through. The silk bag had kept the biscuits fairly dry, and when Old Renus had some slices of venison broiling and the coffee pail hanging over the flames, the boys, watching out from the tent, began to smile.

The rain stopped, and Old Renus heard a faint, steady, rumbling roar from far ahead.

"Purty big falls ahead o' us," he said, cocking his head to listen better. "'N' o' course a long carry. 'N' them trappers are camped thar now. If we wan't crippled, we'd ketch 'em by an 'arly start. We got to gin it up now, I guess."

But that evening, despite their water-soaked condition, was made an endurable one to the boys by the good spirits of Old Renus. "So long's we're healthy, got suthin' to eat, 'n' kin keep warm, we might ez well smile," he said, after lighting his pipe and while they were all lying around the fire on blankets.

"We hev a saddle o' venison, thanks to good luck. We kin keep warm tonight 'n' the sun's goin' to shine tomorrow, so what matters? All 'n' all, ez I said, we might be wuss off. A whole lot wuss."

Morning brought some consolation to the four wet and unlucky castaways, in warm sunshine, and after an enormous breakfast of delicious venison, Old Renus set about mending the canoe with patches of silk sewed inside and out with a thick coat of spruce gum around the borders of these. The gum needed time to harden, so it was noon before a start was made.

"We're nearin' some big falls," Old Renus declared as they once more embarked below the rapids and the rumbling roar they had heard, increased. It so proved, for a half hour later the

stream opened into an oval lakelet at the far end of which a cataract's mist rose above a high ledge barring the stream's course, and keeping to the left and near the shore, Old Renus landed well away from what looked like a big hole in the rock barriers and all four following along this came to a most unique freak of nature. A V-shaped opening in this jagged ledge was bridged over and through this opening the stream leaped into a seething cauldron full fifty feet below to escape among narrow, jutting rocks.

And quite disconcerting to Old Renus, the stream here turned almost due north!

"This hole in the wall sorter clears up one thing to me," he said, as they looked down into this abyss, a Titanic bowl, walled around on three sides. "I've wondered all 'long how it war no lumberman ever come up our stream. Now I know. No logs could ever be got through that tangle o' rocks. They'd only jam 'n' fill up this bowl. Curi's freak o' nater, ain't it?"

It was the most romantic and picturesque bit of wild scenery the boys had ever seen, for the swollen stream leaped through this bridged-over fissure and poured into the pool below with a deafening roar. A cloud of mist rose from it, floating away over a scrub-covered, moss-coated ledge around three sides. The scene was fearsome in

a way, as well as grand, and even Old Renus sat spellbound in silence for a long ten minutes, watching the foaming, seething chaos of yeasty water below.

"Wal, we must be goin', boys," he said finally, glancing at the sun. "I'd kinder hoped we war headed south but it don't look so now. Guess we're p'inted fer Hudson Bay."

The carry around this wonderful cataract was a precipitous one. A climb up and down a sharp ledge with a half mile of tangled boulders beyond, and when the stream was reached, a fresh campsite showed that the two trappers they were pursuing were just a half day ahead. It was almost sunset by the time the carry was made, and they halted for the night. A weird, uncanny spot it was to camp in, for a high cliff abutted on the stream at this point. A lower one rose just across, while great patches of white foam formed a continuous and ghostly procession down the dark running current. To add to the gloomy effect came the unceasing bellow of the cataract. Of all the camps they had made, this was the most cheerless and gloomy in its surroundings. Old Renus seemed to feel its effects too.

"I fear we're in fer Hudson Bay, boys," he said to them, after they had grouped around the campfire. "Things p'ints that way to me ag'in. 'N' I

guess it'll come to jerked venison 'n' fried trout 'fore long. Our coffee, sich ez it is, 'n' biscuits won't last more'n a week more."

He was up and had a fire started by daylight the next morning (about three o'clock in this latitude) and had venison broiling by the time the boys crawled out. "I ain't given up hopin' to ketch them trappers," he assured them, and they were equally anxious, for the moods of Old Renus so dominated them that a cloud on his face brought worry.

That day proved to be a most enjoyable one, for the river swept on in swift current through a splendid forest of larch and fir, without rocks, rapids or carries, and wielding paddles as they all did in their eagerness to get on, they made wonderful progress, and by midforenoon Old Renus spied an opening in the dark forest ahead. A bend from north to west and finally to the south in the river was next joyfully observed, and then before the boys realized what it meant, an opening in the pine growth freshly cut over showed on rounding a slight turn.

In the middle of it stood a recently built lumberman's log cabin!

Old Renus gave a "Hooray, boys, thank God, we're safe!" He made the canoe spring forward to the landing spot and leaped out in feverish

haste. He ran up the path to the deserted camp and looked anxiously around.

"We're all right, thank God!" he repeated, reaching for and shaking hands with Orlo and Jim, who had come up. "Hooray I say for our side! In a week or less mebbe, we'll be out o' the woods. Hooray, I say!"

There was cause for the old man's joy, for this cabin and the freshly cut pine stumps proved to him that they were on the St. Lawrence watershed and in a few days must catch up with some outgoing gang of log drivers.

For a few moments this happy old woodsman halted to determine how much time had elapsed since this band of lumbermen had left, then he hurried the boys into the canoe and pushed on. Two days of downstream paddling with one short and one long carry to halt them followed. Now and then they saw a log stranded on rocks or high up on the bank; another cut-over stretch of timberland with its inevitable log cabin, was passed, and then, late one May afternoon Old Renus spied a column of smoke rising over the treetops ahead. Urging their canoe forward they rounded a bend, and there, perched on a bank, stood two white tents; a cheery campfire blazed in front and around it lay a group of lumberjacks!

The castaways had escaped from a pathless

wilderness and were in touch with humanity once more.

The two batteaus drawn out on the bank added a feeling of safety to the boys' surprised joy. The unkempt and unshaven men in red or gray shirts, who met them in smiling astonishment, looked good, and while they jabbered in an unknown tongue, the handshakes that greeted Old Renus and the prompt aid they gave in lifting the canoe out of water, all spelled welcome. Plates and cups were assigned to them at the lumbermen's long table, and the hot pork and beans, hot biscuits and tea, tasted like home to the hungry boys.

And so ended eight months battle with the vast, unknown wilderness.

CHAPTER XXVII

A WEEK later, three boys and a tall, lanky woodsman, clad in deerskin, with fur caps and much resembling Indians, landed at the smart little town of St. Maurice at the head of tidewater in the river of that name.

Their first task was to find someone among the score of curious, chattering, smiling Canadian villagers, who could speak a little English. Next they located a fur dealer who bought a few of the pelts at a fair price, and then they sought a clothing store and a barber shop, and engaged a double-bedded room at the village hotel.

"Now Orlo," Old Renus said, when so much of an entry into civilized life had been accomplished, "you must send a message home to your mother. Tell her we're all safe 'n' 'll be home in 'bout a week. She 'n' all you boys' folks hez mourned ye fer dead 'bout long 'nuff."

"I'd like to be peekin' when she gits the news," he added, with a far-away look and smile, " 'n' see

how she'll go all to pieces ez she will. Mebbe she 'n' the rest o' ye boys' folks, won't think I'm the worst vagabond in the world now."

That was the first time the boys ever heard him even hint that he knew what his standing was in Oakham.

Orlo's hand trembled when he wrote his brief message in the telegraph office and his eyes were wet, for now he had come to realize what life and death meant in this world.

"Make it longer," Old Renus advised, reading it, while his own eyes grew misty. "Tell her Jim 'n' Levi are fat 'n' brown ez ye be. We needn't skimp on cost now 'n' your mother 'll feel like kissin' every word ye send."

This duty accomplished, the boys, led by Old Renus, strolled around this typical and prosperous Canadian village and it looked good to them, with its bank, postoffice, imposing stores and the two churches with their massive gilt crosses at the apex of many spires. Gaily clad ladies and pretty girls moved about. It was, in fact, a new and marvelous wonder world, and it made Camp Castaway and their adventurous life there seem a weird dream from which they had just awakened.

Their supper, at a table graced by white linen, bright silver and pretty china, was served by a

smiling maid, to whom Old Renus gave their order by signs.

"It sorter seems good to me to be back 'mongst humans once more even if we can't parley voo their lingo," Old Renus smiled, after their supper had been served. "'N' they mean well, too. 'N' I don't think any on 'em 'ud rob us o' a penny. But our comin' in that makeshift canoe 'n' dressed ez we war, hez set the whole town talkin'. The feller I sold the pelts to war so curi's, that I had to fib to head off his questions. We've set the hull town guessin' ez it is 'n' if I'd told that fur dealer the truth, the office o' this hotel 'ud be full o' folks wantin' to peek at us. Mebbe ye noticed how we got stared at on the street.

"'N' it's funny too," he added, chuckling, "to so set a whole townful jabberin' 'bout ye. 'N' yit I don't wonder. To come here ez we did in sech a canoe would set any human sort guessin' ten rods to the minute. But we're goin' to keep mum till we git away on the little steamer tomorrow. I hev my reasons for keepin' whist."

That night in their beds, which were like marvelous dreams of luxury, the boys were once more back at Camp Castaway living their wildwood life, that thrilling, romantic, and fearsome experience. They were glad to have gone through it, but not for even a train load of furs would they have re-

turned to pass another winter in that stone hut.

Their early dreams of living a wildwood life were now banished for all time.

The trip down the St. Maurice the next day by steamer was eventless and yet joyous to the boys, now homeward bound. At Three Rivers, they boarded a palatial night steamer for Quebec, and when morning dawned, they were up and out gazing at that quaint, embattled city, with its magnificent Château Frontenac, and at the awe-inspiring forts towering above them. Old Renus sought out a modest hostelry, and after putting his well beloved boys in charge of a carriage driver for a day of sight-seeing, betook himself to a fur dealer with whom he had once done business, and was astonished to find that the rest of the furs were worth over twelve hundred dollars; then he went to the Province of Quebec land office, to locate the quarter section, or one sixteenth of a township, he meant to buy. An expert draughtsman was secured; the general course of the so-called "Milling Falls" stream whose headwaters he wanted, was drawn in minor detail, and two copies were made. And when all the rules necessary for an alien to observe had been complied with, the proper documents signed, and three hundred dollars in lawful money paid down, Old Renus left the grim stone building, the satisfied owner of the

mine, and four square miles of unexplored land around it.

It was mid-afternoon when he finished this business, and so cleverly had he managed it, that no clerk in the office had even a suspicion that this tall, lanky trapper from Oakham, U. S. A., wanted this land for any other purpose than to hunt or trap upon when he chose. Old Renus made his will, and a deed was executed by which this recent purchase was made over to Orlo's mother, to be held in trust by her for the boy. Then the three happy boys and the old trapper started for Oakham.

CHAPTER XXVIII

OAKHAM was as calm as usual on that June afternoon when Old Renus, rifle in hand, and the three boys alighted from the afternoon train at Tolland and were greeted by the astonished Lem Bisbee—the Oakham stage driver—as from another world. He made haste to telephone Phinney s store in Oakham of their arrival, and two hours later, when the ancient stagecoach halted at that village mart, Jim's parents, together with fully one hundred men, women and children were awaiting it. A prolonged cheer greeted the arriving ones. Jim's mother embraced her boys with frantic kisses and tears. Orlo's sister met him with the same excited welcome. A score of men next seized all three boys to carry them home on their shoulders. The crowd followed eagerly jabbering their comments, while Old Renus, glad to be ignored, darted into the store to buy a few needful things, and then escaped by the back door.

It was a reception and ovation to the boys the like of which Oakham had never seen before.

The old man was glad enough to get away so easily, for he hated scenes. He almost ran across lots to his old rookery, which he found in bad condition. The garden was full of weeds, and the path to the door was half-hidden by them. The two oval panes over the door seemed to glower at him, and on entering the room a pair of disturbed bats flew about excitedly. The warped floor was half-covered with dead leaves. A creeping vine, yellow-leaved, had made its way inward over a rotting sill. The fireplace was banked with soot and growing toadstools, and his tin dishes on a table, rusty and dust-coated.

"Kinder like an old tomb in here," he muttered, glancing around and smiling grimly. "But I ain't no dead man yit by a jugful!"

He made haste to sweep and clean out the room and kill the bats with the broom, determined to rise above the depressing home-coming. His optimism was not all due to his will power, but to something far deeper. He knew that at this moment the boys were telling their wonderful story. That it would lose nothing in their telling, he was sure, and he was equally certain that they had not forgotten Uncle Renus.

"Wal bless ye, boys," he said to himself while

he kindled a fire. "Ye ain't got to worry no more now. 'N' ye're goin' to think o' Old Renus long ez ye live ez suthin' more 'n' an old vagabond. Likewise miss him when he's under sod. 'N' mebbe the folks here, one on 'em anyway, 'll sorter miss him too."

He next began his poor home adjustments; he carried mildewed blankets out to spread on the grass for a needed airing; heated water; washed and scrubbed his rusty tin ware to be ready to cook a meal later. He was in no hurry; for the excitement had checked his hunger as the coming twilight did his buoyant spirits. For ten months he had not eaten a meal without his well beloved boys, and he missed them cruelly.

"There's no use in tryin' to live here now," he said to himself, sighing. "They ain't mine, they can't be mine 'n' thar ain't but one thing left fer me." He sighed again and set about his cooking.

Just then as if to refute his mood, the boys came trooping in, each bearing a basket or a package wrapped in a napkin.

"You didn't think we'd forget you Uncle Renus," Orlo exclaimed excitedly as they spread an ample supply of food on the table.

"Oh, no, not easy," smiled the old man. "Only I thought ye orter stay home tonight anyway. To hev come 'round in the mornin' war all I 'spected."

"And so we shall, too," Orlo went on. "Mother said she was sorry she hadn't anything better than cold ham and a pie to send you. She's going to roast a chicken and send it for your dinner. And you are invited to our house for supper. Jim's folks and a lot of the neighbors are to be there in the evening to hear you tell about everything. They are all so anxious."

"Wal it's good o' your mother Orlo 'n' all your folks 'n' I thank 'em all fer these things. But—wal I jest can't come ez yer mother wishes, Orlo. Tell her I thank her but I ain't no clothes fit to see her in. 'N' you boys kin tell all I could a good real better."

"But mother said to tell you you must come," Orlo urged. Then with a laugh, "we boys will come and fetch you if you don't. Clothes don't matter. It's you they want to see."

"Wal mebbe," Old Renus parried, as the excited boys scampered away again.

But a deeper gloom settled upon Old Renus now face to face with his own situation.

For a long moment he looked at the dainty food upon his table. The pie, a loaf of cake, and another of bread, were each wrapped in a snowy napkin with an embroidered "U" in one corner. Other goodies were packed as if for a picnic. With all these came a vision of a neat pantry odorous of

cinnamon, cloves and summer savory. A dining-table with a white spread, set with pretty china and shining silver. And that home picture so sharply contrasting with his own wretched one, was like a blow. Truly no one wanted him but the three boys, and he had no claim on them; he had felt at times that they were half-ashamed of him, and he was afraid they would become more so as they grew older, until perhaps, as young men they would ignore him entirely, and he would be left to fish and hunt alone. His great affection for them made him certain that to have only occasional and chance hours with them meant desolation for him, and that to remain here longer would be impossible.

The June evening twilight grew shadowy. One by one the fireflies twinkled over a meadow while Old Renus on his porch steps watched them. A low murmur of running water came with the odor of syringas close by. A whip-poor-will called from beyond the brook but the thoughts of the man sitting there were far away in a long-ago past and in another and vine-shaded porch.

How long he sat amid bygones he knew not, when Orlo, walking slowly, came up the grass-grown path.

"Why Orlo, what's the matter?" asked Old Renus waking from his reverie.

"Oh nothing," was the eager answer. "Only I couldn't go to bed till I came and told you something good. Jim's folks have been over all the evening talking about you and—it's a secret you know—but you ain't going to live in this old house only a little longer. Jim's father, he feels so grateful to you he's going to—but I mustn't tell any more now. Only let you guess the rest. Mother is to help too and it's to be a great surprise to you."

"Ye didn't tell her 'bout the mine yet, did ye Orlo?" anxiously.

"No, but please can't I tonight? That is what I came to ask you."

"No Orlo, no not yet," as one chubby hand crept into his. "Wait a couple o' days 'n' then ye kin tell her."

The fireflies kept twinkling. A night hawk high overhead peeped sharply. A frog croaked dismally as a young hand began stroking a wrinkled one.

After a long five minutes of this old and young heart exchange, the boy whispered, "Uncle Renus won't you please tell her yourself? You—you ought to tell her, I think, not me."

"No boy, no, I couldn't, fer——fer——reasons."

Once more there was silence while a rounded cheek lay pressed against an older arm. Then suddenly as if feeling his resolution waning Old

Renus spoke again. "Better run home now, Orlo," he said. "It's gittin' late."

"But you will come tomorrow night?" pleadingly. "Mother said I must make you promise."

"Wal I—I'll see."

But the eyes of one saw the other vanish in a mist of tears.

When Orlo, loyal to his old hero, came again he found the house deserted, for that benign friend and philosopher, that strange recluse, had departed as mysteriously as he came. On his table upon a cluster of wilted syringa blossoms, lay a long envelope directed:

To Orlo, Jim and Levi,

with love, from

Old Renus.

And in the lower left corner.

Mebbe some day you will find me at Camp Castaway.

The Wilderness had called him home.

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